

Caring Too Much (for so long)

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Caring Too Much (for so long)

by [Fandoms I Am No Longer In \(TheWholeDamnTime\)](#)

Summary

George has never questioned the mask.

Notes

“It's so terrifying, but I keep on smilin', I'm good. (Yeah, I'm good.) I've been carin' too much for so long, been comparin' myself for so long, been wearin' a smile for so long, it's real.” - Dream, *Mask*

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Disclaimer: this fic is written about the characters within the DSMP and with the intention to reflect that in the work. Please don't ship real people!

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Summary

Introductions, and kids being kids.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George had never questioned the mask.

He hadn't questioned it when he was thirteen, stumbling over himself as he raced through the forest, the light of a burning village flickering through the trees behind him and the groaning of zombies filling the night air around him. Panicked and terrified, tears streaming wild, wiggly lines down his face and armed with nothing but the color-correcting goggles he kept stashed in his pocket, he had leapt over tree roots and boulders, dodged tree trucks and bushes, swerved to avoid the arms of the undead that clawed for him until a single miscalculation caught his toe on a swell of earth and sent him crashing to the ground.

As he scrambled to get his feet under him again, hands and knees stinging from the impact, he heard the loud moan and turned to see one of the rotting, shambling corpses practically on top of him, its jaw slack and its hands stretching out to drag him towards its waiting maw.

For a moment, George could feel the end.

*WHACK!*

One moment, the green-grey corpse was there, and the next it was not. Eyes blinking wide in shock, the boy glanced over to find the figure of a child in a dark yellow hoodie, the hood pulled up and what appeared to be a paper plate with a wide smiley face drawn across it where the actual face should be. The figure dropped the stick it had been brandishing like a weapon and instead reached out a hand towards George, a sense of urgency in its movements as the mask stared blankly down at him.

"Let's go, we don't have much time!" There was a groan from the side as the zombie- very much not dead, unfortunately, just knocked down- started to pull itself towards them, and for a split second, everything was slow. He was hyper-aware of everything, the cold night air and the grit of the dirt against his hands, the sounds of the woods rustling layered beneath the sounds of its residents coming to kill them.

The moment broke, and he reached for the hand.

Hand in hand, the two boys sprinted deeper into the woods, despite everything in George's gut screaming that it was a bad idea. He could feel the fingers of the smaller boy wrapped tight around his own, could feel the throbbing of his terrified heartbeat trapped in their tips from the vice grip wrapped around him, could feel the tug that kept him running forwards, keeping pace with the shorter legs of the smaller boy as he led him deeper into the darkness. Time was a blur, the trees each looking the same as they whipped by, the only moments sharp and defined within his muddled mind the sounds of the mobs approaching in their peripherie.

Just as he was starting to question whether he should wrench his hand from the stranger's grasp, though, he saw a poorly crafted wooden door pressed into the side of an upcoming hill. His guide was dragging him in a beeline towards it, not even dropping George's hand as he grabbed the handle and tugged it open, pulling them both into the room before slamming it behind them. It was then his grip finally released, his hands working quickly to slide in a few bolts and blocks into place, firmly locking the roughly hewn board in place. For a few moments, the only sounds in the small dirt room were the heavy panting of the two boys and the stumbling footsteps as George took a few tentative steps into the inky blackness. As the gasping breathing started to even out, there was a bit of shuffling followed by the sound of striking flint and steel, flickers of sparks lighting a small corner of space until a flame bloomed. The other boy was kneeling beside a small ring of stones in one corner of the room, the dirt walls framing it in black with smoke streaks and char marks. As the fire flared and grew it illuminated the small, seemingly cobbled together home, light bouncing off the smooth dirt walls.

"What- what were you doing out there?" asked the boy, finally breaking the silence, scuffing his feet against the floor.

"Why were *you* out there? Hell, why are you out *here* ," he said, gesturing wildly to the hut they were in, the space seemingly carved and hollowed by scraping hands and tools, a sparse

few items that looked like they'd been scavenged from back alleyways and hewn together by unskilled hands littered about like a parody of liveable furnishings, "you're, like, a kid!"

"I'm... I'm not telling you that, I don't even know you!" the boy blustered, raising his hand to his dirty blond hair. "I can't just, like, *trust* you."

"Then why am I in your house?" A long pause followed the snapped question, the two standing across the small space from each other, brown eyes blinking back at emotionless, unblinking dots on a mask. The figure in the hoodie twisted his hands together, finally breaking the mockery of eye contact as his head swung away to glance at the ground.

"I mean... I couldn't just leave you there," the boy said, his breath rattling out a soft sigh that buffeted the mask. A few moments passed, the air quiet and numb between them as the older boy's eyes fell to the compact dirt floor, eyes tracing where the thousands of footprints had packed the earth down.

"Thanks," George said quietly. The boy shrugged, eyes still not moving up to meet his own as the elder of the two reached up to run a hand through his hair, tugging sweat-drenched strands away from his brow.

"I was already out. I didn't notice how late it was, and I was running, and I saw you fall, and..."

"Thanks," he repeated again, uncertain of what other words the situation warranted as the smaller boy pressed his back to the solid dirt wall and let himself slide down into a sitting position. Slowly, his guest followed suit, stepping back until his back pressed against the smooth, cold dirt and lowered himself so he could pull his knees into his chest. "I'm George," he said into the quiet, open air, pushed forth like a peace offering between them, "what's your name?" There was no answer, and so he tried again. "Where are you from?" Nothing. "How old are you?" Silence. "Are you okay?" That, at least, got a small nod of confirmation in return and George sighed. He needed something to fill the awkward pause, the stilted silence, the discomfort that came with the unfamiliarity. "This is like a bad dream," he finally admitted to the small space, his words half-whispered and almost to himself as they hung again, taking up the emptiness. There was another long pause, both boys lost of words as they caught their breath and the gravity of the situation started to sink in, a weight settling in on their shoulders.

"... Dream." George's eyes snapped back up again to the impassive mask, the black marked eyes staring at him, empty. "You could call me Dream," he clarified.

"Dream," the older boy echoed. "Okay."

George didn't question the mask.

He didn't question it when they'd gone to bed that night, Dream slipping into his bedroom and leaving him in the front room with a roll of blankets and some cushions that seemed to serve as a sort of couch or sitting area in the tiny, thrown-together home. Instead he'd pushed his makeshift bed up against the wall so he could easily see the doors to the other room and the forest and laid on his side, watching them both until exhaustion overwhelmed the fear and he slid into sleep. When he awoke the next morning, the boy in his yellow hoodie and mask carefully stoking the small fire beneath the opened trapdoor in the ceiling, there was a strange breath of relief rather than trepidation. He stirred from his space and stepped forward, taking the piece of proffered bread with a small hum of thanks and sitting beside the warm flicker of flame, allowing himself to relax in the space, even as Dream settled to kneel beside the flames as well.

There was no reason to distrust someone who had saved him, hadn't gone through his pockets or slit his throat in the dead of night, who was, by all accounts, just another child scraping his way through the world. So as they ate a small breakfast together, he let his shoulders ease of tension and his eyes to wander away from the other boy.

As they finished their meal, the quiet drew out awkwardly between them. Dream brushed off his hands and drew his legs up to his chest, crossing his arms over them as he settled his chin on his knees. George's hands moved to fidget with the hem of his shirt, his eyes focused on the bumps and edges of the fabric rather than the space around him or its other occupant. He had broached the space the night before, exhausted out all his gentle conversation starters, and frankly felt like he was running out of fuel. There was only so much effort he could put into beating away the stony silence when the other boy seemed to only reinforce it.

"So... I saw the fire. What happened?" George's head shot up in surprise as the quiet voice came muffled from behind the mask. Swallowing, he felt his lip catch in his teeth as he

sucked in a breath, trying to blink away the flashes of the towering dark figures attacking, the screaming, the crackling of flames that immediately flickered through his mind.

“Raiders,” he said quietly, the word dropping like an anvil between them, its impact leaving in its wake a sharp, shocked silence that he quickly rushed to fill. “I woke up and everything was on fire and everyone was screaming so I ran.” His shoulders bounced in a shrug. *Deflect*, he thought, seeing the horror already apparent in the way the other boy’s head had snapped up at the first word. *He doesn’t need to know the details*. “I heard screaming, and nobody else came out of my house and...” There was a thick feeling in his throat that he tried to swallow down, a pang in his heart as the memory of the pools of blood with the limp bodies of his family members bubbled up within him. “I didn’t see any of them. I don’t think any of them survived.”

“I’m sorry.” A fist, clenched so tight the knuckles were white, balled itself beside the other boy as George swallowed hard, wondering why there was no choked feeling crawling up the back of his throat. His heart was numbed out and he stared blankly out at the dirt floor before him, the morning firelight mixing with the daylight streaming through the trapdoor. The boy who knew nothing and no one there was reacting more viscerally than he was. *How fucked is that?*

“Thanks,” he offered in response. The awkward quiet fell between them again, and the elder boy found himself straining to find any threads of a conversation.

“... Should we go look for survivors?” Head snapping up, George looked over at where the masked boy beside him was carefully still, unmoving, any expression hidden behind the shitty paper mask. Mind racing, he considered the horrors waiting for them outside the door, the smell of the char and the bodies, and felt his hands start to shake.

"Maybe just in the woods," he said quietly, his voice barely over a whisper. "I don't think you'd want to see what's left."

Dream nodded solemnly and stood, brushing the dust off of his pants and hoodie as his guest followed suit. They prepped in relative silence, the younger tossing occasional supplies to George as they scrapped together what meager things they had. Armed with sticks and armored with what confidence they could muster, they stepped out into the forest once more.

It was far more welcoming in the daylight, sunbeams streaming through the leaves and not a mob in sight. The scent of smoke hanging low on the air, though, made George's skin crawl and all he wanted to do was turn around and crawl back into the hole he had come from, hide beneath the cushions in the meager excuse for a living room and not reemerge until every trace of the taste of it was gone. There was work to be done, though, and he and the boy shifted their packs on their shoulders and shared what he assumed was a quick glance before setting off into the dense tree cover together with solid footsteps and silence that spoke of purpose.

They wandered for hours. The sun was climbing steadily in the sky as they hiked closer and closer to the source of the burning smell, the smoke becoming thicker and more cloying on their lungs as they took more and more frequent breaks for breathing and water. Footprints and the occasional dropped or singed item were the only hints of humanity found before they finally broke for lunch, sharing more bread and some berries found along the way in relative quiet, their ears skimming for sounds of danger or distress far too focused for conversation. They brushed away crumbs in silence, spoke in gentle gestures to keep going, and set off again, the silence becoming a familiar space settled between them. George wasn't sure at what point he'd become comfortable enough with the masked boy to let him travel behind him, let him follow in his blindspot and keep an eye out behind them, but he realized the strangely intuitive feeling went both ways as he paused to tie his shoe and Dream kept going, gesturing at the older boy to watch their backs.

Somehow, wordlessly, they had gained each other's trust, and it settled something in George's chest as they moved in tandem to complete the task on their hands.

They'd been winding, sweeping the forest in a snakelike pattern for nearly the entire day when he wondered if they should give up. Clearly, everyone was gone, either disappeared into the woods or in a blaze of flame and smoke. Slowing to a stop, he let out an exhausted huff of air and turned to suggest they stop when he was greeted by Dream's finger raised to the smiley scribbled across the mask.

“ *Shhhh!* ”

“Wha- I *sighed* , Dream, what the hell?” he snapped, the words bitter with the day's fruitless work.



“Shut up!” the younger boy bit back, turning his head back and forth, and George’s jaw snapped closed as realization hit. Pressing his lips together and letting his eyes slide shut, he focused on the noise of the forest around him, the rustle of the trees, the soft trill of a songbird, before faintly, barely there, carried on the breeze-

“ *Help!* ”

Immediately, his eyes snapped open and he was running. Crashing through the bushes, his legs carried him over uneven tree roots and the natural rolls of the earth until he could hear the cries just a little bit louder, a little more to his left. He readjusted his trajectory as he raced along, hearing the snap of branches and shaking of leaves that followed his path as Dream followed in his path, sweat starting to soak into the pale paper of his mask.

“Mom? Dad? I’m down here, please, I need help!” came the voice again, closer this time, and painfully young. Its pleas were desperate and thin, and George could hear the pain threading through the words as he drew nearer and nearer, until he barely managed to skid to a stop beside a drop-off.

Leaning over the edge, he marveled that he had barely managed not to fall into the gap. The area must have been where meltwater flowed in the spring, surrounded by thick shrubbery and small trees as it cut a deep rivulet into the land itself, creating a mini cliff face that looked like a six or seven foot drop to an uneven bottom. As he looked down on the scene, he saw a small boy, even smaller and younger than Dream, sitting at the bottom with a mop of jet black hair flopped over his eyes and tear streaks marked in dirt down his cheeks.

“Hey,” he called softly, and frightened eyes shot up to meet his as the masked boy shot into the clearing beside him, almost stumbling down the cliff himself before catching a hand on a nearby tree to steady. “Hey, are you okay down there?” There was a quick shake of the head, and George’s eyes trailed down to where the kid had his leg splayed out in front of him, pants pulled up to expose a swollen ankle nearly twice the size of what it normally would be.

“Can- can you get my parents?” the boy asked, voice thick and croaky with tears as he raised it to try and reach them. Quietly, he flicked a glance over to Dream.

“I don’t-” started the masked boy, but George lunged in, cutting him off.

“When was the last time you saw them?”

“T-they gave me this and told me to- to run and they’d find me.” The kid raised a small pack from the ground, sniffing through the words as he tried to keep down the choking sobs. “B-but I already ate all the food and I’m thirsty and I’m hungry and my ankle hurts and I want my mom,” he said, sobbing openly now, the words hiccuping through the broken sounds.

"Hey, hey, listen, it's okay," Dream said quickly, the words coming in a rush. "Listen, George here, he made it out okay. I bet a bunch of people did, but everyone just kind of... ran, so it's going to be a little bit until we can find your parents." Glancing at where the boy next to him was nodding encouragingly, he continued, "We can help you until then, okay? You're hurt and it's going to be night soon and I don't want to leave you here."

"You can stay with us until we can find them or you're better. We have, like, a little home and food and stuff," George added, wincing a little as he offered up things that weren't even technically his. The masked boy next to him didn't protest, though, so he doubled down. "It's safe. A lot better than waiting in a hole, too."

"I'm Dream, and that's George. What's your name?" the other boy asked, his voice as gentle as he could make it, but immediately fear flickered across the kid's face again and he instinctively pulled back.

"I'm not supposed to trust strangers."

“It’s okay, you don’t have to tell us your name,” George offered, holding up his hands in a gentle, placating motion. "It's- we need to stick together. Find some adults who can help us, maybe another settlement." There was a strange shifting noise behind him, and when his eyes slipped away from the kid in front of him, he saw that Dream had taken an instinctive step back, hands tightened into fists. "Or... or we could just stick together out here. Surviving is easier with more people." As he spoke he kept his eye on the boy by his side instead of the kid, watching Dream's shoulders rise and fall once with a deep breath, actively shaking out his fingers as he moved forward again to peer down the hole.

"And you're hurt. At least let us help you until you're better," he offered, leaning down to stick out a hand. The young boy in the hole crossed his arms, jaw firmly set as he stared up at them.

"But I'm not supposed to trust you." George groaned and rolled his eyes, his hands coming up to rub at his face. "What if you guys are some of the raiders?"

"We would have killed you by now if we were the raiders," the eldest boy said quietly, almost to himself. Even with the words half-mumbled out, the silence slammed down on the three and the kid in the pit averted his eyes, shuffling his one good foot against the dirt beneath him. "Sorry."

"You're probably right," grumbled the kid, shifting to put weight on his good leg and awkwardly pulling himself into an upright position. "I still don't trust you guys, though." A huff of relief rushed from George's lungs as Dream took one of the small outstretched hands and nodded for him to take the free one. Together they hauled the kid out of the pit, gritting their teeth and trying to ignore the slight yelps of pain as the injured foot instinctively tried to help and push. With one last heave, they dragged the smaller boy over the edge to lay on his belly, smeared with mud and darker red stains none of them particularly wanted to think about. The quiet this time was more comfortable, filled with the white noise of heavy breaths catching themselves in their lungs and slowing back down to their standard pacing.

"So, if you don't want to tell us your name, what should we call you?" asked Dream, leaning back on his hands as the kid pushed himself up into a sitting position, an easy smile spreading over his face despite the swollen and injured leg splayed out beside him.

"Well, if you're 'Dream', then I guess it doesn't have to be a *real* name." The eldest boy let out a huff of laughter before he could stop himself, shaking his head slightly at the blunt statement. "... Pandas? Can I be Pandas?" A grin slid over George's face at the wide eyes eagerly staring up at the two of them, a flicker of happiness in them despite the circumstance.

"Sure," he said, gently reaching out to pat their new friend on the back. "Pandas it is."

Between him and Dream, they were able to trade off giving Pandas piggyback rides back to the small hole in the side of the hill. George had never been more grateful to be older than another person, lifting the smaller kid onto his back with relative ease and only trading off

with his masked partner when his arms started to ache. And if the slightly smaller boy tapped out a little faster than he did, he didn't mention it. It was survival, after all.

George didn't question the mask.

Even as the time passed and their small band slowly transitioned from awkward silences and distrustful glances out of the corners of their eyes to an inseparable team, he didn't pause to ask why his best friend was still wearing the paper plates to cover his face like a mask. Within the first week, the two able-bodied of the trio had carved out two more rooms in the little burrow. Another month had passed before they stopped turning the locks on their doors in the night. A week passed and, finally fully healed, Pandas disappeared for a day, only to return with tear tracks down his cheeks and the smell of soot and smoke on his clothes. The other two welcomed him back with open arms and didn't question what had happened as his fists bunched in their shirts and he hid his tearful face from the world in the fabric. A few months after that, they'd put the full force of their efforts into their residence, figuring out how to replicate crafting materials and smelters from the burnt out husk of a town and were steadily bettering their little home built into the hillside. Another month, and their movements with and around each other were muscle memory as they scouted new areas, watching each other's backs and moving with utmost confidence they were being covered by the other two. Three more months after that, George could recite each of their favorite foods, colors, and birthdays from memory. Two months after that, he could hardly imagine what living without them was like.

The hovel had progressed in leaps and bounds after the youngest's ankle had healed. Now, over a year and a half after they had all met, it was a home. Each of their rooms had glass in the ceiling to let them look out and let in the light, the fire pit space had become a small kitchen space, and the living room was properly outfitted with places to sit and decorations on the walls. It was a small home, now, and there was a warm level of certainty in being able to step into the central room and find someone for company, or to be able to knock on another's door and bug them until they invited the knocker into their space or came out to join the others themselves. They had each other, they had their home together, and that was everything they needed.

Well, that and birthday parties.

"You know, I'm ten now! I want a grown-up name," Pandas said,

“What’s wrong with Pandas?” asked George, only half paying attention as he worked on smoothing frosting on the cake, eyes narrowed and tongue between his teeth.

“I was *eight* when I picked it, come on ,”

“He’s got a point, you know. Double-digits club now,” interjected Dream with a laugh.

“Exactly!”

"Do you want to tell us your real name?" asked George, still more focused on evening out the colors than the conversation happening in front of him.

"No." There was a pause as a set of brown eyes flicked up from the pastry.

"But you want a grownup name."

"Yes."

“Okay then,” the eldest said before diverting his attention back to his baking and continuing his work. The frosting was *almost* right, but every time he tried to smooth it out he just ended up making another accidental mountain of the stuff...

"How about... Frederick?" asked Dream, leaning in and watching Panda’s face twist at the offering with a laugh. “Don’t want to be a Freddy? Okay, okay, how about...” After another ten minutes or so, George threw up his hands and let the stupidly uneven frosting be, instead moving to join his friends on the cushions in the living room as Dream spewed out another long list of names that were just as quickly shot down.

“Daryl? Or Matt?” he offered, throwing his own ideas into the mix as the birthday boy quickly shot down his offerings as well. Between him and Dream, they switched back and forth throwing out offerings of new, more “grown-up” names until George could swear that

the actual day of the kid's birthday was going to be over long before they could come to any sort of consensus. As they went on, the names started to grow more ridiculous, ranging from "Tree" to "how about a shortened version of Richard?" as the exhaustion of the day started to catch up with them and seep delirium into their humor.

"How about... Sapnap? It's Pandas, but, like, backwards," Dream offered, slumping back against a heap of cushions with a defeated sigh. Grumbling, George felt his pillow pile teeter wildly as the other boy flopped against it and leaned over, brow furrowed.

"No it's not," he hissed under his breath, trying not to catch the eye of where the youngest was sitting, deep in contemplative thought.

"Well I'm not calling him 'Sadnap', that's just depressing," hissed back the blond, reaching up to run his hands through where his hair was sticking at weird angles with how many times he'd fidgeted with it over the past hour, deep in thought.

"... Yeah, okay, fine, Dream." George's eyes flicked back to where the youngest's jaw had set and he was looking at them with something excited in his eyes.

"I think I like it." There was a certainty in Panda's- now Sapnap's voice as he nodded resolutely, like his mind was made up. "Sapnap."

"Sapnap," George repeated, nodding. There was a quick pause as they all looked at each other, nodding and excessively formal until the newly named Sapnap started to giggle. Before long, the sound was infectious and they all broke down into laughter, guffawing at themselves and the supposed solemnity of the situation. As he wiped the mirth from his eyes, George finally cut in, "Great, well, now that *that's* over we can have cake." Brimming with pride, he made his way to grab the pastry from the counter and bring it over to the low wooden table they'd scrapped together to eat their meals from. "Blue for me, red for Pan-Sapnap," he said, correcting himself and seeing the birthday boy preen at the use of his new name, "and then yellow for Dream!" he said, pointing at each section in turn before looking up expectantly at his friends. Instead of the affirmation of his work he was expecting though, he found confusion bunching the youngest's face together and amusement lacing the other's as he laughed.

"Seriously?" came the chuckle from across the table. "I'm hurt. It's been almost two years now and you can't even remember my favorite color." The cake felt heavy in George's hands as his mouth fell open, indignant as he immediately jumped to his own defense.

"You said your favorite color was the color of your hoodie!"

"My hoodie is *green*, George!" The boy in question stopped dead, frozen for a second as the information started to process and churn through his head.

"Oh no." Immediately dropping the cake the last inch to the table's surface with a clatter, he lunged for his backpack, ignoring the laughter coming from his two friends. His hands fumbled over the clasps, tearing it open and finding stems and unused blooms from his earlier foraging endeavors, all his usual gear shoved to the bottom and shifted around with the strange items he'd added for the strange excursion.

"What, are you colorblind or something?" Dream cackled. "These don't even look--"

"Actually, uh, yeah," he cut in, frantically tossing things from his pack as he dug for the goggles he had just stashed away after searching for the right dyes for the frosting. "I- I have some goggles for it, but I usually just use them if I'm foraging so I don't accidentally kill us," he explained, practically turning the bag inside out until he unearthed the lenses in their chunky white frames. "They're not particularly good-looking," he mumbled, a slight flush on his cheeks as he slid them on, "and I don't want to look like an idi- *oh*."

"*Oh*," the green-clad boy mimicked, voice light and mocking as he laughed at the flush quickly spreading over his friend's face. "Talk about looking like an idiot. So I just look, like, piss-yellow to you usually?" A finger swiped through the bright frosting and slid beneath the mask, and George could swear he felt the smirk burn straight through that damn paper plate.

"I was *so close*," he groaned, collapsing into a seated position beside them as they laughed at his exaggerated anguish.

"It's still cake," Sapnap said, sticking his own finger into the frosting and licking it off, the forks sitting forgotten beside all of them. "And hey! It's not poisonous, so the goggles did

half their job!” Grinning, the birthday boy swiped off a large swath of blue and smeared it across George’s nose, narrowly missing the white frames adorning his friend’s face. “Cheer up!”

“ *Wha-* you little-” he cried, reeling back from the sugary attack and immediately lunging for his own ammunition.

If by the end they only had a few bites still edible and Dream had to make a new mask because it had become a mosaic of primary colors, nobody was complaining.

## Chapter End Notes

Hi all!

So I had a really, really simple concept for a fic. Thought I'd churn out ~5k and post it and be done with it, get it on the page and move on to more of that fun Soulmate!AU stuff I've been poking at.

Folks, this thing is at 23k and it's still working. We're still going. This is going to surpass the word count of my most popular and longest fic on this site to date, and I still don't know how to feel about any of that.

Right now it's looking at 5 chapters, but we'll see how it goes! I'm probably not looking at any more than 6, but then again I thought that this would be a 5k fic and we're at nearly 5x that now, so what do I even know. Hopefully you're enjoying this so far, the kids being kids and all, and I'll try and get the next chapter up ASAP for you all! Thanks for reading and as always, you know any comment, kudo, or subscription makes my life so thank you thank you thank you for anyone who interacts, you are what keeps me creating <3



## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

Teenage years and the light of something starting to dawn on the horizon.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George didn't question the mask.

He didn't question it when the seemingly infinite supply of paper plates in Dream's bag got low and the masked boy said he needed to go into a town, resolutely decreeing that he was going alone. He did fret, though. George had only just hit legal adulthood and been the only one of them to venture into town, leaving behind the younger boys in the hopes that he wouldn't attract any attention or questions as to why such young faces were travelling without their parents. He'd traded for tools they hadn't been able to get their hands on and some sweets from the bakery, smiling and trying to charm his way through every interaction even as the shopkeepers barely blinked at his presence and the pink haired girl behind the bread counter looked even younger than him. There hadn't been nearly as much scrutiny as he had feared, but even so he couldn't help but worry his friend would dig himself into trouble with his recently acquired height, the clumsiness that came with the rapid growth, and his attention-grabbing fashion sense.

When Dream returned and the strange tightness in his chest dissipated with a sigh, George let himself breathe out the tension, focusing instead on the stitches he was weaving into the new bedding sets he was making for them.

"Give me another five, guys, and dinner's ready" Sapnap said, staring into their small oven, his brow pinching as he stared at the fish baking inside.

"Need any help?" George asked, glancing up to see Dream settling beside the table and Sapnap crossing his arms as he diligently watched his food cook.

"Nah, just waiting now." Humming an acknowledgement, George tied off his stitches and set aside the vibrant blue fabric he was working with to move a few feet over to their table, settling across from Dream. Opening his mouth to ask how the trip into town had gone, he looked up and froze before he found himself only able to utter a single syllable.

"Oh."

"Oh?" asked Dream, his head tilting.

"You got a new mask," he explained, staring at the perfectly smooth lines of the happy face looking back at him. The new face staring back at him was familiar enough, a white circle with a smile in dark, inky-black contrast, but at the same time it felt foreign and wrong, something creeping up his spine in discomfort. The mask was plastic now, the surface smooth and shiny without even raised bumps for the black markings. The smile itself was too perfect, the strokes too smooth and the eyes too round to feel like the hastily scribbled on image that usually accompanied them. At least before, the masks were flawed and fumbled until they had some personality to them. This felt... inhuman.

"Oh, yeah. I needed- well, we were running out of paper plates. Besides, this is harder."

"What did I just hear about Dream getting hard?" Sapnap called from the kitchen area, and George choked on air.

"Sturdier! I meant sturdier-"

"We finally figured out the reason for the mask! God, Dream, if anonymity is what gets you off-"

"Oh my *god*- "

"What, Sapnap, you jealous?"

" *Dream!* "

The banter dissolved into nonsense, laughter and quips, soft punches thrown into shoulders and open hand pushes sending the others half-stumbling back. It was easy and natural, the exchange familiar even as George pushed through the strange pauses and stutter-stops that came over him each time he looked into Dream's new eyes. He kept finding those perfect black dots, kept stilling before ripping his gaze away, kept avoiding eye contact for more than a mere moment for fear of a shudder running through his body he couldn't disguise.

He knew it would take a while to get used to the new mask. The body language cues were still the same, the tilting of the head and how he walked or positioned himself, but when he was so used to seeking out the eyes when he spoke to people, George found a deep, unnerving undercurrent when he stared into the perfect circles.

His eyes dodged Dream, quickly busying himself with other things as they spoke over dinner, affixing his gaze on the floor or nearby furniture or the plate in front of him, each accidental glance filling him with a sense of awkward discomfort that he quickly sought to alleviate. He was almost grateful when night came and he could excuse himself to his room, slipping under the covers with an exhausted sigh. *It'll just take time* , he reassured himself. Turning over, he tried to bury his head into his pillow and think of anything else before the grey fog of sleep swelled to claim him.

The next day, the three of them woke early and prepped to go foraging, baskets in hand and George's goggles strapped to his forehead like wide owl eyes.

"I need to get something, I swear," Sapnap joked as they ate breakfast. "You guys and your face gear making me look like a third wheel." He waved a hand flippantly at their respective garments, scoffing, "You're even color coordinated."

"Hey, white's just one of the few colors George can see normally, give him a break."

"Hey! Well, white's not a color, so-" Simultaneous groans from the other boys cut him off and he grinned, popping the last of his breakfast into his mouth and brushing off his hands. "We ready, boys?" The groans became vague sounds of agreement as the group moved to head

out. As they stepped outside into the early morning sunlight, George slipped down the goggles and watched the world around him burst in vibrancy. It wasn't perfect from what he could tell, but at least now he could distinguish green and red from the muddle of other colors around, and in a forest the sweeping swaths of and different colors of green were absolutely breathtaking.

The edible mushrooms stood out, a dark red amongst the foliage (not the red with white spots, of course, the delineation between delicious and deadly was far too thin) that without the glasses was nearly imperceptible in his usual world of blue and yellow hues. He and Dream were in charge of grabbing those and any flowers they could dry and powder for dyes, searching the forest floor for edibles and useful things while Sapnap climbed trees and jumped from treetop to treetop, seeking out the fruit amongst the branches. So much of their foraging was red hidden with the green, from the red of the apples to mushroom caps to the salmon swimming in the seagrass, and George quietly thanked the fact that he'd grabbed the goggles on that dreadful night he met Dream.

As he was pondering this, staring at a mushroom and a green flower growing side by side before moving to pick both, he heard a quiet voice break the silence behind him.

"Hey, George? Are you... like, are we okay?"

"What?" he asked, startled. "Yeah, we're fine. Why wouldn't we be?" Instead of continuing his work, George stood and settled his weight on his back foot, his free hand moving to tug his goggles up to his forehead as the other settled the basket on his hip. Dream glanced over and sighed, tossing one last yellow- or maybe green, now that his lenses were gone George wasn't sure- flower into his own pile before moving to stand as well.

"I don't know. It feels like you're avoiding me or something," he said, awkwardly shifting his weight, gaze fixed on the ground. "Is it because I went to town? Like, we talked about it before and everything went fine, so I don't know why you'd be mad, but that's the only thing I can think of." He looked up at his friend, the mask staring blankly straight ahead, and George immediately averted his gaze, moving to shift and mess around with the things in his basket. "See!" Dream cried, pointing as George flinched. "Like that."

"It's not you," he said quickly, keeping his eyes on the petals of the flower he was toying with. "It's that new mask you picked up." He stole a look to see the smiley face was slanted sideways at the statement, confused.

"It's the same as the old ones. Just *harder*," Dream replied, voice light as he dragged the joking banter from the day before back, cracking a small smile on George's face.

"It's not, though." Pressing his lips together, he tried to pull together something to satisfy the curious tilt in Dream's head. "It's just... I don't know, too perfect? It's weird," George offered with a shrug. "I'm sure I just have to get used to it."

"Okay." The taller boy bent to pick up another mushroom, seemingly satisfied with the answer, and the conversation slipped back into comfortable working quiet, the issue left feeling resolved despite nothing changing at all.

The next morning, though, when Dream ducked out of his room, George forced himself to look up into the dark spots that stood in for the eyes. He had to make sure his friend didn't think he hated him, after all, even if the new mask turned something over in his stomach each time he made eye contact. When he did, though, he froze. The black circles were a little bigger than before, still nicely rounded but offset, the one on the left expanded downward while the one on the right was extended upwards. With the new additions they were tilted, light and quirky, the slightly wobbly edges speaking to their hand-drawn nature, and a small smile grew across George's face as the new image put him far more at ease. It was a small, subtle change that probably was going to breeze right over Sapnap's head, but something soft warmed beneath George's sternum at the sight. Dream grabbed an apple and sat down next to him at the low table, his knees banging into the edge, as he leaned forward to speak in a voice low enough that wherever the youngest was, he couldn't overhear.

"Better?" George smiled.

"Much."

The two sat there for a moment, something sticky and sweet cloying the air they were breathing, the moment only broken when a door violently slammed open and Sapnap rushed out, grinning, a white band of fabric tied over his forehead with the tails of it fluttering behind him. Breathlessly eager, he rushed the few steps from his door to where the older boys were sitting and gestured up at the new accessory.

"What do you guys think? Am I part of the 'cool kids with white stuff on their faces' gang now?"

George sputtered and Dream wheezed, any softness of the moment broken by poor phrasing and teenage minds as Sapnap stared at them, confused as they struggled to regain any semblance of composure to explain and failed, elbows pressed into the table and faces buried in hands as they laughed, the youngest watching as his friends seemingly dissolved into madness in the early morning light.

George didn't question the mask.

It wasn't that he didn't question things. He did question the timing of the transition to hard, permanent plastic. He did question the way that despite the group's closeness, there still felt like there were secrets lingering between them. Sometimes, when it was late and the sun was coming down, glinting sharply on everything reflective as the sky turned colors George couldn't see right, the boys would sit outside the front door and let the quiet of the night pull hushed thoughts from between their lips that weren't as easily spoken with harsh sunlight revealing bitter flaws. It was far easier to speak them into the cold darkness and pretend they faded away into the shadows, disappearing instead of laying bare for the others to see. There were never questions, no pushing and prying for more, just quiet admissions whispered on breaths that became mist in the chill of the night between long, still silence that failed to bring discomfort no matter how long it stretched.

As the evening drew to a close, late summer sun barely lingering in the sky, George stepped out the front door to breathe in the cooling air. A glance down the path revealed Dream already out there, sitting in the nearby clearing with his back against a tree and his mask resting a few feet away from him. It was smiling blankly up at the sky, the golden beams of the last streams of sunlight glinting off the surface, and anticipation started to build in the older boy's chest.

He could walk over, right then, and see his friend's face. He'd known him for five years, and Dream still kept the mask on through it all. He'd even replaced it with plastic, with some sort of strange permanence, and some deep, cat-like curiosity in his friend's chest wanted to *know*. There had to be a reason for it, had to be some kind of explanation or choice for its strict boundary between his friends and the most simple of intimacies, but Dream never spoke of it. George swallowed as he stared at the choice in front of him. Maybe, in the fading light of the summer night, it was time. It was time to know, time to quietly slip over and see, time to ask, time to pry, to seek out the sight and the answers that would satiate the little tug in his ribcage that always wanted to know more. If he was careful, he could make it over and glimpse the

usually guarded sight before Dream realized he was there. He could see the last golden glimmers of sun marking the cleanest path, notating the dips and curves in the road, and he felt his mouth dry as he stared at the choice before him, the road leading his eyes to where his friend sat.

Staring out at the blankness of the mask, he sighed and looked down at the dirt and leaf litter as he stepped forwards onto a branch, sending the sharp *crack* of the clean break echoing up the path.

Hands immediately scrabbled for the piece of plastic on the ground and he swallowed, trying to ignore the screaming of the curious creature in his chest. Dream's comfort was worth more than his satisfaction, and he promised himself he'd at least ask *why* when he got the chance. That why would have to satiate his curiosity, even if he didn't get to see what was so carefully hidden away, and as he drew closer he made sure to step on the piles of leaf litter, to kick aside branches and other forest debris in his casually meandering strides, making his approach clear and slow as the accessory was fastened into place.

"Hey," he said as he drew close, settling into the grass beside his friend and looking up at the colors he couldn't see painted across the sky. He could at least see some of the gradation, see the darkness starting to seep into the sky, but for now he let himself take a small sense of quiet comfort and serenity in the presence of his friend instead.

"Hey," Dream replied, the sound trapped and bouncing behind white plastic, and they let the quiet drape comfortably over them as the sky continued to grow dark, as the first few stars started to flicker to life and evening transitioned to night. The moment lingered, soft and silent, and George couldn't help but breathe a soft sigh of relief. This felt easy, felt safe, and even though something still tugged and sent soft pangs through his chest there was a gentle certainty that he had done the right thing, made the right choice, let this sense of trust stay solid between them instead of throwing it away for his little, desperate want to know. He could always just ask.

"You know, the town we went to wasn't bad." George was startled from his thoughts, jumping as he glanced up to where his friend was leaning his chin on his knees, looking down at where his fingers idly picked at the grass beneath them. "Happy people, pretty peaceful and welcoming."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." There was a pause as Dream pulled up another blade of grass, the roots still clinging to tiny balls of dirt. "You know, we're getting a little big for the cave."

"You are, you mean." A clump of grass was thrown George's way and he laughed, imagining the begrudging grin he knew was hiding beneath the mask. "Come on, Dream, I've seen how many times you've hit your head on your doorway. You're almost touching the ceiling!" A chuckle met his words as another clump of grass and soil went sailing by.

"Yeah, okay, maybe I am, but that doesn't make it *wrong* ." His fingers went back to fidgeting, picking and pulling.

"So, what did you want to do?"

"I don't know." Dream was actively not looking at him, instead very intently focusing on the little gouge in the dirt he'd created and was prying deeper into, mud and soil starting to cake beneath his nails. "We could build ourselves a house. Like, a proper house, like the ones in town." Something scared and flighty started to creep into the corners of George's mind as his friend kept talking, drawing his focus away from the actual words about logistics and ability to make themselves somewhere to call home and instead circling around the last word that had passed his ears without feeling fuzzy around the edges.

"You want to move into town?" The older boy's voice was hoarse, thick with emotion as he stared at his friend, flames starting to lick at the corners of his mind.

"Not *in* the town," he amended quickly as George swallowed tersely, nodding and trying to shake away the flash of roaring fires in the back of his mind, the screaming and the smell of thick, noxious smoke choking his senses. He could feel his eyes unfocused, staring into the middle distance as the light from the flames played shadows across faces still and unmoving, unblinking eyelids that would never be shut and soft features that would never move again.

The feeling of a hand's weight atop his own dragged him back, wrenching him out of the pained memories and back into his body, breathing labored and tears pricking at the corners of his eyes.



"Definitely not in the town," he said, voice tight as the tendons beneath his friend's fingers.

"No, definitely not," Dream agreed, quietly giving his hand a small squeeze, his own words clipped and controlled. Slowly, he took a deep breath and continued, "But how does, like, thirty minutes from the edge of town sound? Close enough to walk, far enough that we're still a little too out-of-the-way for any trouble." As he explained, the hand over George's slid away to gesture out the spaces, the divide between the locations in a visual roadmap painted by fingertips on air. Slowly, grounding himself on the dirt beneath his feet and the warm sound of his friend's voice talking of their future, he brought himself back down and evened out his breathing, feeling the fire and flames start to subside. Focusing back in on the content of the words rather than their rhythmic consistency, he leaned in to listen to the excitement about maybe having carpeted floors, about putting in more windows and having more space than they did now, about the things they could do and build to make themselves a proper home. As he finished talking about putting in lanterns so they didn't have to keep torches or other flames going through the nights, he turned to look at George.

"Doing better?"

"Yeah, I'm doing better." There was a small nod of acknowledgement and George felt his friend reach over and give his hand another gentle squeeze.

"Good."

The quiet settled over their shoulders like a blanket, warm and comforting, their hands resting between them still overlapped. George stared up at the sky, at the tiny pinpricks of light glimmering against the midnight blue sky, deep and dark and yet speckled through with what seemed like an infinite sprinkling of those shining, shimmering specks. Even as he gazed into the cosmos, he was grounded by the warm press of the touch of overlapped over his and the picture of the home Dream had painted in his head, a possibility fleshed out by wondering, wanting words painted with gentle brushstrokes in his mind's eye. It could be real, if they really worked for it, and slowly he started to parse out plans, lining up ideas until his musing fell from his lips before he realized he'd spoken aloud.

"Even if we're outside the town- do you think they'll want, like, documents and stuff? Like land ownership rights and whatever nonsense they come up with," he said, his voice trailing

off at the end, eyes unfocused and the lights in the sky starting to blur at the edges.

"You're gonna have to sign the paperwork, then, Georgie." Brow furrowed, he pulled his gaze from the heavens and focused in on where the starlight was illuminating the mask beside him instead.

"Wha- Why me?"

"You're the 'adult' here," Dream said, laughing at his friend's indignation as he used his fingers to throw air quotes around the word. "Besides, you're not going to be able to weasel my name out of me that easy." The joke was met with an easy laugh, mirrored by the slight shake of the taller boy's shoulders.

"Oh, come on. You're never going to tell us your real name?"

"Maybe when I'm an old man like you." George let out another burst of laughter and elbowed his friend, jabbing the sharp point of his body into his side as he laughed, a wheezing, whistling sound that mimicked the hiss of steam from a tea kettle more than laughter. "No, seriously!" he sputtered behind the mask, trying to lean out of the way of another swing of the elbow with a chuckle and failing. A short gasp of pain cut off the brunt of the laughter as he raised his hands. "Okay, okay! Geez, I didn't *mean* it." Falling back onto the grass, his hands splaying out in the cool, damp blades, George let himself laugh. They laughed until his cheeks hurt, until the mirth bubbling out of him slowly simmered out into an ache of soreness in his belly, until the sounds echoing out from beneath white plastic were more breath than sound and they relaxed into the comfortable feeling of it.

"But no. When I turn eighteen, I'll tell you guys my name."

"Fair," the elder agreed, a grin slanted across his face. "Tell us your old man name when you become an old man, too."

"*Hey!*" Dream cried, sitting up indignantly to look down at his friend with what George could only imagine was the most incredulous look on his face.

“ *I can say it, I’m actually eighteen-*” Jibes and jokes flew back and forth in their usual banter, warm and homey, comfortable in its familiarity. The boys bickered and laughed, and as they wasted the night away beneath the stars, the mask never came up.

They started construction on their house the next week. It was fairly simple to find a spot for their new residence. The group had gone into town for their weekly supplies and a few extras they could use for their building, walked about a half-hour out again and started to explore. Within a few hours, Sapnap had found a river they could fish in and Dream had discovered a small valley between some hills that was well-hidden but wide enough for them to build the home they wanted. George, meanwhile, had found a good section of forest to use for supplies and was busy replanting the seeds and fertilizing with bone meal as his friends came to reconvene. Practically bouncing with excitement, they helped him haul the wood he'd gathered back to their location and watched as he skimmed the rolling fields, the natural slope of the land protecting them from view and the flowers and plants scattered about making the space picturesque and perfect.

Setting down his stack of wood, he turned to the others with his chin up and something firm in his stance.

"Ready to get building?"

It took them most of the first day to even get the layout planned. Laying out pieces of roughly hewn wood, they set out spaces for a kitchen, a living room, and a bathroom on the bottom floor, arguing and debating about the best space allotment and how much they'd really need for the upper floors. Once that was done, the sun was starting to set and they had to set up torches to light the night, marking out the decided outline with shovels before slumping down next to the bonfire and eating their dinner in exhausted silence. Sleeping bags were scattered around the fire and they prepped to sleep under the stars, the only words exchanged about who would be taking what lookout shift as they moved, zombie-like, to sleep.

George was shaken awake for his shift in the earliest hours of the morning, the moon creeping steadily towards the horizon as Sapnap moved to collapse back into a deep slumber.

As he watched the slow turn of the stars shifting overhead, listened for any sign or sound of danger, he couldn't help but cast quick, small glances at his friends curled up by the flames.

They looked wonderfully peaceful at rest, and a small bubble of affection swelled in his chest as he saw the youngest's lips move in quiet mumbles and murmurs of sleep-talking, something about bread and flour, and Dream's mask glimmered with starlight. It amused George to no end that the mask stayed on even in sleep, the boy even going so far as to readjust it without waking so it slid more comfortably over his face. It was practically instinctual muscle memory, reaching up and readjusting it to a perfect center in even the deepest of slumbers, and George couldn't help but grin as he watched a sleepy hand flop up to shift it back to its proper position. He leaned back and let himself relax into the work, letting his gaze flit between the stars, the trees, and the sleeping figures before him.

Eventually, the stars began to disappear and the sky began to lighten softly, not enough for blue to begin to creep into his vision but enough that a soft, sleepy sound drew out from behind the mask as Dream pulled himself into a sitting position. George had to stifle his giggles as a sleepy hand moved up to try and rub his eyes and instead bounced off the mask, staring confused down at the sleeve of his hoodie like it was its fault that it had bounced away.

"Morning," he said softly, watching the blond's head shoot upright to look over at him. Dream gave a soft murmur of response and stood slowly, standing and slumping over to his friend as he practically collapsed in a heap beside him. "Still tired?"

"Mm-mm. Waking up," he responded, first words of the morning raspy and thick with sleep. Slowly, his head fell to rest on George's shoulder, the edge of the mask just over the space his shoulder took up and instead the warm side of his jaw pressed into the warmth there. After a brief pause, a moment of stillness trying to contain his surprise, the older boy let his head tilt back to tap against the top of Dream's and felt the vibration of a small, contented sound trickle through him.

"You sure you're not falling asleep again?"

"Yeah. Sun's coming up. It'll be too bright soon."

"You say that, but I can feel you falling asleep on me." A small, indignant groan was all the response he got to the accusation, and he let a small laugh fall from between his lips, trying to ignore the way affection bloomed under his sternum at the sound and instead focus on not jostling the boy in question with his amusement. A long, drawn-out yawn came muffled from

behind the white plastic and a smile tugged itself across his lips despite their press together in an attempt to keep them in a straight line.

“It’s only for a few seconds. Sun’s bright as shit, it’ll wake me back up if I do sleep.” George hummed in acceptance, feeling the slow bobbing of weight increasing on his shoulder, as the masked boy struggled to stay awake against the drowsiness that was still lingering on his words and in the drape of his body over his friend’s.

“C’mon, Dream, you’re gonna miss the sunrise. It’s supposed to be really pretty, come on, wake up,” he said, jostling the boy on his shoulder until he groaned and pushed himself upright again, mumbling out a few indistinguishable curses beneath his breath before shaking off the sleepiness and looking out to the skyline.

"Have you ever seen a sunrise before?" he mused, sleep still heavy on his tongue. "Properly, I mean, with the goggles."

"No."

"Wait, wait, we have to-" There was a rustling as he grabbed for George's bag, tugging open the top and digging through the things inside. Finally surfacing with the lenses in hand, he shoved them towards his friend and gestured for him to take them. George couldn't help but smile as he took them in hand, sliding the band of them over his head and looking up at the sky.

Just like that, his breath was torn away.

The sky was a rainbow.

He had imagined sunrises like reverse sunsets, inky indigo-black paling to the rich colors of flowers blooming across their new home and even further to a soft lavender with the barest hints of pink and orange lining the base, but he could not have been more wrong. The edges of the sky were bright and warm, the darkness of night chased away to soft pastel blues that shifted to a glowing yellow, the chalky green making a thin, muddled line between the two he had to strain to see. At its base, the edge of the sky flared a red orange, the color of fruits so

bright they had to be artificial, a glow filled with indescribable promise of the day to come and radiating pure, vibrant energy. The gradation was almost perfect in its bands of color across the sky, their thicknesses varying but strong presence there all the same.

“ *Oh* .”

“Oh,” Dream echoed softly, something warmer than the sunlight tinting the words, and George could hear the smile woven into his voice. For a moment he thought of turning his head to look at the other boy, to share the moment, but remembering the blank smile that was waiting for him he pressed down the urge and instead let his gaze feast on the wonder before him.

“We have to put windows on that side of the house,” he finally said, only realizing how his jaw had been hanging lax when he felt the dry rasp of his tongue and lips.

“Even if we sleep through this most days?”

“It’s still worth it.” Dream hummed his agreement and George watched as the sun continued its climb towards the lip of the world, as the rainbow stripes began to fade, green muddying into the more traditional blues that blanketed their world, the yellow starting to diffuse and the molten, burning colors concentrating into a core, laying out the red carpet for the guest of honor about to take their place in the sky. “I don’t know if we’ll pull off anything else about it, but we’ll at least have some gorgeous sunrises.” There was a low chuckle from his friend as he shifted and readjusted himself, hands splaying out as he leaned back. George had to keep himself from jumping as he felt the soft, accidental brush of fingers against his own, sending a quick shock of electricity up his arm at the unexpected contact.

"It'll be a good home," Dream said, the words slipping out easy and musing, tinged with amusement and warmth at the idea.

"You think?"

"Yeah," he said softly, reaffirming with a small nod as they stared out into the blur of color together. There was a flicker of the bright beams starting to crest the hill, shining pure light as

the sun rose. Voice dropping down to a murmur, the masked man gently added, "I don't think it could be a bad one with you guys there."

George swallowed and nodded, his chest full to bursting as the day bloomed before them, the gentle touch of their fingers brushing between them as hot and bright as the ball of fire rising in the sky.

The actual structure of their house took a week. It was a week of camping outside of rising walls and pillars, a week of campfire food and lookout shifts. George always took the early morning shift and Dream would always join him, goggles in hand, silently passing them over as the sky started to bleed color and chase away the stars and night. They'd wait until the sun was high enough that it stirred Sapnap from his sleep before breaking the quiet and getting started with their day.

When enough of the house was up and safe that they moved into the living room, setting up their little camp on hard wooden floors rather than the dirt and soil outside, protected from the creatures that lurked in the night by sturdy walls, George couldn't help but be a little disappointed. No threats meant no watches, meant no more early mornings with quiet goggles passed over and warm sides and arms pressed flush to each other to ward off the cold. It meant no more moments of a drowsy cheek pressing into his shoulder, of accidental drool stains marking his hoodies, of the soft, affectionate tap of his head onto Dream's as the younger slid back into sleep for a fleeting few moments before the sun's rays dragged him back more permanently. It ended the moments of quiet comfort that entangled their hands together with George's muttering about being cold, took away the chance for a repeat of the time that Dream had pillowed his head in George's lap instead and hidden his face in his stomach to sleep through the rising sun.

Strangely, though, it didn't stop the little flicker in his chest when he looked over at his friend. It was barely there, something strange and sparkling like the way bubbles of soda popped against his tongue, but he pushed it away as he moved his things into the room beside Dream's, the one with the window that beckoned in the sunrise.

The little extra heat from morning sunbeams was worth the honey-sweet sensation in his chest he couldn't name, and he decided that he would simply call it *home* .

Update number two done and under the belt! This chapter honestly had the most work left to do to it when I posted the original, lots of gaps to fill in and I actually ended up rearranging most of the first conversation because it wasn't flowing right at first. So I'm very happy to be posting this and saying it's DONE!

The updates on this and new works being published miiiight take a little bit more time now. I'm grinding at a thesis, just started Twitch streaming myself, am looking for a job, and might pick one of my old part-time ones up again on top of that. Life's swinging back into gear. But while things might take some time, I can at least promise that this WILL be finished. I promise. Like the only completed chapter I have is the last one right now and so help me god I love that last chapter and it WILL be getting posted. So hit subscribe if you want to see that happen, and I appreciate any and all of you who leave comments, kudos, and more! You all make this fandom life worth living <3



# Chapter 3

## Chapter Summary

Something starts to flicker, while something else catches fire far quicker.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George didn't question the mask.

Not verbally, anyways. He did start to think. It had been enough years that it was clear Dream was comfortable with them, sharing his past with them as they had huddled around the campfire with a half-built house behind them, keeping his word and sharing his real name with his friends the day he turned eighteen, sharing jokes and laughter and days in and days out with them. They never bothered to switch over names, ignoring "Clay" for the sake of the familiar sound falling from their tongues that he said he preferred anyways, throwing an arm around George's shoulder whenever he talked about where he got his strange moniker from. He knew the man behind the mask inside and out, easily trusted him with his life whether it was a casual walk through town or fighting their way out of a bad exploration session with broken weapons and terror beating in their hearts. Despite that, though, there was something strange about not knowing what he looked like beneath the white plastic.

There was also the strange, flickering feeling that had started in his chest, the small burning that sparked flame, a foreign sensation that he bit his lips over and tried to quell for the strange flush that it brought unbidden to his cheeks. Pushing it away, pressing it down, feeling it compress and squish in his chest while making his lungs tight, he smiled through it and hoped his friends didn't notice.

There was a lot to question, and George let the thoughts spin circles in his head, twisting a hurricane in his psyche. His attachment to his friend mixed and muddled with the distance that the mask created, tangling together and sending his psyche down a twisted path to confusion.

It didn't seem to help his jumbled mind that they were spending more time together now, too.

Part of this was Sapnap's fault. For the first few months after they had finished their new home and moved in, things were functioning as they were before- three boys functionally attached at the hip as they moved through the basic day-to-day tasks, splitting work between them all but moving between each as a unit, rarely if ever leaving shouting distance. Town trips were like that, too, with the group going from shop to shop with pleasant smiles and courteous conversation with the residents and shop owners as they bought what they needed for the week.

The blacksmith knew them for when they came to buy or repair tools, their presence hailed by the happy waves hello from the man's apprentice and son, a boy about George's age who had a penchant for accidentally setting off small explosions that rivaled those of the creepers who stalked the places where torchlight didn't reach. The girl at the flower shop beamed when they came in with handfuls of blooms in their arms for her, tossing fluffy hair over her shoulder and regaling them with stories of when she was a sailor despite looking younger than and barely coming up to the shoulder of George. More than once they found themselves nodding along to a particularly vicious rant about some thief in town, hoping that nobody would accuse the strange out-of-towners while a boy with orange hair and grey streaks that didn't match his age snickered in the corner. Thankfully, though, all the adults seemed to regard them with a fair bit of warmth and the others around their age called them into conversations with open smiles and welcoming gestures, and soon enough they were considered part of the little community, hearing the gossip that flew around and being filled in on any events that were happening or coming up to be sure they didn't miss out by being a bit of a walk away.

They were most notably and most consistently regulars at the bakery and George had learned that the pink-haired girl he'd spoken to had, in fact, been younger than he was. Over the course of them settling in, he struck up enough conversations with her to become close, learning her name, learning that she was about the same age as Sapnap, that the pink wasn't natural- "Wait, you thought *what?!*" - and that when the next year turned over she'd own this place herself and let her parents retire from the shop. He'd dragged her around the counter to hug her excitedly, congratulating her as she giggled until Dream had interrupted with questions about some of the loaves he was looking for. He'd shot his friend a look for ruining the moment, but the masked boy was already talking about what they needed to buy for the week and pointedly ignoring the sour expression directed his way.

It was their regularity at the bakery that made Sapnap's behavior so strange. George hadn't picked up on it the first time, of course, new behavior was strange but without a pattern, otherwise meaningless. So when the youngest member of their group stood up from the breakfast table too quick, his movements too awkwardly stiff and jerky, the oddity bred confusion rather than concern.

“You know, I forgot, I was going to pick up some, uh, rolls. To go with the soup tonight.” George glanced at Dream, perplexity written across his face and finding the blankness of the mask staring back with a slight tilt that read to be just as baffled as his friend. “Don’t worry about it, I’ll just run into town really quick. Not a problem, I’ll be back soon-” Sapnap rambled, his movements awkward and stiff as he made his way out the front door, clearly fake smile plastered over his face and baring teeth like they couldn’t see the anxiety where the grin failed to raise his cheeks, much less meet his eyes. “See ya!” The door closed and George glanced between the solid piece of wood and his masked friend, the silence slightly stunned as they took in the odd turn of events.

“I guess we just... go without him?”

“I guess.”

When Sapnap returned six hours later with a bag of rolls, a much more genuine smile plastered over his face as he approached his friends, Dream and George shared a glance. The unspoken question of their friend’s timeline for a trip that should have been a quarter of the time it had ended up being hung between them until the eldest gave a little shake of his head and went back to tilling the ground for their farm.

Only two days passed before it happened again, Sapnap excusing himself to run into town for more breakfast pastries despite the bag of danishes George found mere minutes after he’d rushed out the door. The usual shopping trip happened at the end of the week, but somehow in the days following the youngest ran off to fetch forgotten loaves of bread to go with meals and muffins for breakfast, even racing out the door to pick up some sourdough to go with soups despite the fact that they’d already bought some days before. Somehow, despite only spending the money needed for whatever he was going out for, he always came back with extras, too. Their kitchen counter was cluttered with pastries after a few weeks had passed and George was starting to have to squish anything he picked up from the pile to make sure it hadn’t staled into a brick.

“Okay, you need to stop,” he finally sighed, dumping a bag of rock-hard rolls into Sapnap’s lap, making him jump as their shells knocked into each other. “I don’t know why you’re bringing this many pastries home or where the hell you’re getting the money, but have you *seen* the kitchen?” Slowly, an eyebrow raised in George’s direction.

"Uh, yeah? It's really nice, I helped build it when we were working on the house, you cook-"

"No, smartass," the older boy sighed, rubbing his eyes before sliding the hand up, smoothing pressure over where the muscles in his brow were painfully pinched together as he moved to comb his fingers through his hair, "the *piles* of bread and sweets and god-knows-what-else you keep bringing home!" There was a pause, an awkward swallow, the shifting of eyes as the snapped statement settled between them.

"... oh."

"Every few days, you think we 'forget' something, and ditch us to run off into town again," snapped George, gesturing towards the settlement with a sweep of his free hand. For a moment, he stood there, arm held wide, hand still bunched, stressed and tight, in his own hair until the tense breath held tight in his lungs left in a defeated huff and he deflated with it. "Listen, man. If you want to, like, move into the village or something, that's fine. I- Dream- we just want you to be happy, you know?"

"George-"

"It's fine! You shouldn't be, like, held back by us or whatever. Just because we-"

"George, George, no-" Sapnap cut in, making whatever words were going to follow instead fall dead on his friend's tongue. Slowly, George blinked at his friend, watching as he cut himself off with a sharp inhale, like he was steeling himself for the explanation to come.

"I have a... friend. That works at Niki's bakery. So I go and, uh, spend some time with them. It's not a big deal." George's lips pinched together, brow furrowed as he glanced back into the kitchen at Dream digging through the piles of sugary treats and baked doughs, eventually coming up with a bear claw and trying to tear off a chunk before realizing that it, too, had staled into a brick and tossing it back into the heap.

"Can't you just ask them to hang out when they're not working?"

"I'm... getting to that." The younger boy's lips pressed a thin line together as he looked anywhere but his friend's eyes, his hands twisting together in his lap, and something clicked together in George's head as he took in the picture before him.

*Oh .*

A wide grin split across his face as he watched Sapnap realize he'd said too much, watched as his eyes started to flicker around the room to anywhere but the person in front of him, watched as his lips pressed together and hands came up to awkwardly rub at his cheeks.

"Dream?" George called across the room, his smirk only growing when he saw the slight flash of panic in his younger friend's eyes.

"What's up?"

"Can you come tell me if Sappy Nappy's blushing?"

"Oh god, you guys are making this so much worse," the embarrassed boy groaned, his head falling into his hands as Dream dropped his search for snacks and instead headed over with a smirk of his own.

"Hands down, Sappitus," he said, mock-stern as he marched over with pomp and drama in overly-stiff shoulders and a comically raised chin.

"Come on, guys, don't make me-" Before the protest could go on much longer, Dream's hands wrapped around his wrists and tried to drag his hands down from his face, leading to a tussle as the younger pulled back against him. The masked boy was older and taller, though, so after a few minutes of yanking back and forth, Sapnap's hands awkwardly smushing back into his own cheeks as he fought for them to stay there, Dream was finally able to pull them away and let out a sharp bark of laughter.

"Come on, even with the colorblindness you should be able to see this. He's practically *purple*," Dream cackled, the sound bouncing behind the mask as he dropped his hold and rocked back in mirth. "Awwww, is Sappy Nappy getting sappy for someone?"

"Shut up, Dream."

"Who is it? Niki? Niki's pretty, I wouldn't blame you." A strange, unfamiliar pang struck through George's chest as the masked man mused and he furrowed his brow momentarily before pushing the sensation away and refocusing on the way Sapnap's head fell back into his freed hands at Dream's suggestion.

"C'mon, guys, can't we just leave this alone?"

"No," laughed the eldest, crossing his arms and looking down at his bashful friend. "You'd never let this go for us. Fair's fair."

"Is it Puffy? She's in on weekends sometimes, brings flowers for Niki's front window."

"Seriously, it's not a big deal--"

"I've seen Eret in there, too," George cut in, musing. "I don't know if they're an employee or just Niki's friend, though."

"Guys--"

"Oh!" Dream cried, snapping his fingers and gesturing small circles with his hand as he tried to stir up the memories he wanted. "How about that skinny kid with the fluffy hair! I don't-fuck, what was his name--"

"Karl."

The regret in Sappnap's eyes was immediate as the name slipped out and his friends hungrily pounced on the information, George leaning in with something mischievous sparking in his eyes and Dream slinging an arm over their friend's shoulder.

"Oh, *Karl* , is it?"

"C'mon, now, tell us about him, we want to know *everything*- "

"Guys, come on, stop-"

"Aww, Sappy Nappy likes the pretty bakery boy-"

"He's not *pretty* , shut up, he's just- I just think- it's just that he's nice to me and stuff-"

"Oh my god, your voice gets all soft when you're talking about him-" Sappnap cut them both off with a long, pained groan as he rubbed his hands over his face, kneading at his forehead with exasperation. His two friends broke down into cackling laughter and he finally broke a begrudging smile.

"You guys are the worst."

"We know," George laughed, reaching out to sling an arm around his friend's shoulders. Dream did the same from the other side and Sappnap shook his head between them, chuckling softly to himself.

"Shopping trips are going to be *awful* now."

"I'll make you a deal," the eldest laughed, leaning forwards to glance between his friends. "You stop bringing home so much extra bread and we'll do our best to reign ourselves in."

“Deal.”

A week later, Sapnap was dragging them out of the bakery, his face burning red as they laughed and made half-hearted protests to his desperate sputtering.

“I never promised we wouldn’t do *anything*, I just said that we’d do our best!” George cackled as Dream bent double and let out a long wheeze. The door slammed shut behind them and the youngest let his face fall in his hands, pushing his fingers desperately against his temples in tight circles before looking back to see a pair of grey eyes staring shocked at them out the glass panes of the shop’s windows. Somehow flushing an even brighter red, flustered hands pushed his friends along the street until they were out of view and the boys stumbled to a stop, George using Dream’s shoulder to hold himself up, barely keeping himself from stumbling as they laughed.

This was all Sapnap’s fault, after all. If he hadn’t left them alone together so much, maybe they wouldn’t have bonded enough to embarrass him this badly.

Dream let out another tea kettle wheeze as the youngest’s back hit the wall and he slid down into a sitting position and looked to the sky like it might give him the answer to his mouthed question of *why?* as George grinned with the knowledge that in his rush to get them out, Sapnap had forgotten the bread they’d initially been there for. Leaning over, he whispered that to Dream, who fell into a fresh burst of laughter, leaning back against him. *It’s Sapnap’s fault, after all*, he thought, grinning at his friend through tears of mirth. *Well, maybe.*

George didn’t question the mask.

At that moment, though, he envied it.

Sapnap thought he was clever, getting his revenge on them like this. A "mistake", a simple request for help getting something from the tallest shelves of the small closet before pushing George in alongside where Dream was stretching for the box, closing the door behind them and "accidentally" breaking the lock. *Why was there even a lock on this closet?* thought George as his face flooded with heat. *More importantly, why did we make this closet so small?* They had given up on their friend finally letting them out, the desperate jostling of the door



handle as their shoulders bumped into each other finally ceased, the yelling his name across the house even as the one beside them cringed from the screams slowly fading into quiet as they took in the situation and the fact that they weren't getting out any time soon. With that resignation, they'd settled into a comfortable silence, only broken by the sounds of their shifting, trying to get comfortable in a space that was far too small for that. Every movement brought the bump of hands and elbows, feet and legs, even torsos pressing into each other if they both moved at once. Quiet, murmured *sorry* s flickered back and forth between them until the taller boy let out a loud groan, the sigh carrying the exasperation that was filling the small space between them, and broke the silence.

"So. Uh. George. How long do you think we're going to be stuck in here?" asked Dream, his voice uncomfortably close to George's ear. The shorter boy raised his hands and placed them against his friend's chest, fingers splayed and gently pushed him back, only gaining an inch or so of personal space before he was stopped by the shelves in the way.

"How long were we in the bakery for?"

"Five minutes?" George let out a hum, pretending to muse on the answer as he realized his hands were still on Dream's chest, palms pressed to the thin material of his shirt with the heat radiating between his fingers and the hidden skin underneath. Using the guise of contemplation, he drew them back and tried to ignore his fluttering heartbeat as one folded under his chin, rubbing against it as if he was deep in thought.

"Yeah, no, he's locking us in for at least a day. Get comfortable, we're sleeping here." Dream wheezed out a laugh, moving to lean forwards and accidentally headbutting the boy in front of him with an ugly clunk of foreheads. "Ow!"

"Shit, shit, sorry," the taller boy apologized, reaching up to rub at the lump on his own head.

"That *hurt* , Dream," George complained, rubbing at the spot, feeling it throb with pain. "Jerk," he said, voice still affectionate as he reached out to push his friend back into the shelves by his shoulders.

"What, want me to kiss it better?" The taller boy teased back. George glared at him, hoping the small amount of light coming from the cracks around the door were enough to pick up that, at least. Judging by Dream's chuckle, it was. Now he was left hoping that the strange

flush that was gathering in his cheeks and making its way down his neck was less visible than his expressions were in the low light.

"I- what kind of question is that?" he sputtered. Dream just laughed again, deeper in his chest this time, and George rolled his eyes, leaning back against the shelves with a sigh before suddenly stiffening.

There were lips pressing against his forehead. He could feel the angry red bump, feel the throbbing and feel the gentle press of lips against the spot as the bottom edge of the mask cut into the skin right above it. George felt his brain short-circuit, sparks hissing inside his skull at the dual revelations. Dream had his mask pulled up, and he was kissing George's forehead.

For some reason, he couldn't seem to figure out which was worse.

The lips were pulled away before his mind had unscrambled itself, but the sputtering soon followed, his mouth trying to form words before his brain could bother creating actual content to say. Finally, after what felt like forever, his mouth formed words again.

"W- what was that?!"

"I said I'd kiss it better, didn't I?" Dream laughed, even as George's hand flew out to push his shoulder and he took a stumbling step back into the shelves, hand coming up to tug the plastic back down into place.

"You're so weird," he said, hoping the laugh sounded more natural than nervous, heart beating a million miles an hour for reasons he didn't want to unpack right then. Not locked in a closet, not in front of Dream, not with their bodies bumping with every shift and movement in the tight space.

"Aww, you know you love me, Georgie," the masked boy teased and he felt his heart stutter-stop. *Not right now*, he thought, trying to keep his breathing even, trying not to cave to the way his lungs were starting to shift to shorter, shallower breaths with flickering panic. *I am not thinking about this right now. Not now, not here-*

"I can't believe that idiot's left us here this long," he grumbled, reaching out to jostle the door handle again and freezing when it slid open easily under his hand, creaking open an inch and hanging there, loose between his fingers.

"It wasn't locked," he finally managed to say, voice splattering to the floor and he couldn't imagine sounding more stupid. There was a long, lingering moment of quiet as he and Dream stared at the open door, only broken by a long wheeze. The lanky boy was doubling over again, this time his head falling onto George's shoulder as he laughed.

"We're the idiots."

"He must have unlocked it." He blinked, stating the obvious like he couldn't process anything but the most surface-level thoughts. "We've been sitting here *forever* and *he unlocked it*." He could feel his friend shaking with laughter where his face was pressed into his shoulder, feel the smooth plastic of the mask hiding away in the crook of his neck and instead of moving, simply sat there and stared at that crack of light and wondered why now he didn't want to leave.

"Let's get out of here," Dream finally said, composing himself and drawing away, leaving a strange pang in George's chest as the door opened. The eldest forced a neutral smile on his face as they stepped out into their home again, tangled emotions rooted firmly in his heart but still pushed aside with the desperate hope they wouldn't arise again.

George didn't question the mask.

If he was going to, though, the fishing spot would have been the place. Fishing itself was a relatively mind-numbing experience, casting the lines out into the water and waiting for the tug of a fish, so the first time the three of them had done so they'd fallen into easy conversation that had slowly wandered deeper and deeper into seriousness as they spoke, until nighttime had claimed the area and they were talking under the stars, their voices low as they spoke of fears and hopes, of thoughts and feelings, of the past and their dreams for the future.

It was a space for filling in the things they didn't say normally, a place for quiet contemplation or settled statements, a shared moment of divulged information and the small intimacies of knowing.

They headed down to fish in a group, bait in a pail gathered late the night before and the sound of the water rushing by a settled white noise that burbled in the background. Perching on rocks along the shore or sprawling out on the grassy banks, they would hook the nightcrawlers and toss the end out into the rippling water, letting it bob along the surface in the hopes they'd catch a bite as they tugged and toyed with the line, hoping the insect they had on there looked like an enticing meal to what would hopefully soon become a meal of their own. It was quiet and peaceful between catches, and they would let themselves bask in the settled, comfortable silence until someone finally spoke.

Today, it was Sapnap.

"I had to explain to Karl why we don't live in town," the youngest said quietly, his gaze steadily affixed to the water as though he wasn't really seeing it.

"Oh, shit."

"How did that go?" asked Dream, his voice forcibly nonchalant despite the way George could see his hands tightening around where he held the fishing rod.

"Not as bad as I thought it would." The eldest let out a long breath he hadn't realized he'd taken, relief starting to ease the tension he'd held in his shoulders. "He didn't, like, actively try and make me recount everything. Definitely didn't try to make me justify it or anything, either, so that was nice." George hummed in acknowledgement. "Still sucked. I cried." A small hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as his fingers began playing with a stray piece of line, remembering, "He cried, too. Just a big sap."

"I thought you were the big Sap," joked Dream, reaching out to bump his knuckles against the youngest's arm in a mockery of a punch, drawing a full grin from him as he rocked back from the impact.

“Ha-ha.”

“I know, I’m hilarious.” George and Sapnap rolled their eyes and scoffed in sync, drawing a quick peal of laughter from beneath the mask before the mellow quiet draped itself back over the scene.

"But yeah, no, he was understanding and stuff. Told me to tell him if there was anything he could do to help, that sort of thing." There was a deep huff of breath, a pause after the words poured out in a quick flood. "It was pretty good overall. Sympathy kisses are nice," Sapnap said flatly, like he was commenting on the weather rather than dropping information that had both of his friends snapping their heads over to look at him.

“Wait, he *kissed* you?”

“You guys *kissed*? ” George cried at the same time, glancing over at Dream’s equally shocked stance. Instead of embarrassed or flustered, though, Sapnap just looked up at the two of them with his brow slightly pinched in confusion.

“Yeah. He’s my boyfriend, of course he kissed me.”

“Hold up, *what*? ” George asked, holding up a hand, their rods all but forgotten beside them.

“Dude, we’ve been dating for, like, *weeks* now.”

“ *Weeks*? ”

“How did we not know about this?” gasped Dream, his hand coming up to his chest in a mock pearl-clutch. “We’re your family, Sapnap, how could you not tell us this important information?” Slowly, the shock started to fade from George’s face as he started to catch the tone in Dream’s voice. “You’re going to invite this boy of yours over for dinner immediately, Sappitus, we need to meet him.”

"You guys saw him like three days ago when we went shopping-"

"And we have to approve of him, of course," George added, crossing his arms and setting his jaw in a hard line that definitely wasn't struggling to cover up a smile. "Can't have our baby Sappy running around with any bad influences."

"Oh, god, guys-"

"Honey," Dream asked, turning his face towards George, and even with the knowledge that it was a bit the older boy felt his heart flutter at the pet name, "should I get out the shotgun?"

"We don't seriously have a shotgun, do we?" The older two glanced over to where their friend's face had fallen into disbelief, concern written over his brow with the quiet *what if* lingering in the back of his mind. Immediately, at the genuine fear starting to flicker at the edges of his expression, Dream broke and let out a long wheeze, quickly being joined in his hilarity by the eldest as the fear melted away to indignation in the youngest's glare.

"No, but seriously, invite him over for dinner sometime." Sapnap's gaze drew back to George as he spoke, words accompanied by a simple shrug and a warm smile. "He means something to you, and we're your best friends. We want to meet him, properly."

"You can't shield him forever from how terrible we are," Dream chimed in.

"Damn, I was hoping I'd get a few more weeks before he ran away screaming," Sapnap said, tone deadpan but a smile still tugging at where he was trying to force his mouth into a flat line. "It was nice while it lasted."

"At least you got sympathy kisses?"

"Before he meets you two and decides to never see me again."

“Oh, come on, we’re not *that* bad.”

“I dunno, Dream, we’re pretty bad,” George said with a laugh. “Especially if we try.”

Sapnap’s head fell back with a long, pained groan and his friends dissolved into laughter, reveling in his misery as only the best of friends could.

Thankfully for the youngest of them, Karl wove his way into the group easily. Sharing laughing fits with Dream, making quips and comments thrown easily over the dinner table, and most notably being the cause of the warm smile that never seemed to leave Sapnap’s face when he was in the room, George knew he’d be a pretty permanent fixture in their little band of misfits. The offer for him to join them on his off days from the bakery was extended before the evening was even half over. The night wound on and on, and when it got too late Sapnap left to walk his boyfriend back home, leaving Dream and George sprawled next to each other on the couch.

“Sap’s going to be spending a lot more time in town, now.”

“We’ll make do. It’s not like this hasn’t been going on for a few months already.” There was a beat of pause before George felt a hand shove at his shoulder, pushing him away. “What, are you going to get sick of me or something?”

“What, you? *Never*, Dream,” George laughed, inflecting drama into the word even as his heart beat wildly in his chest, the statement a little too close to true for the staccato beat to slow its rapid tempo. Swaying his momentum back towards his friend, he pushed him back and let the topic drop to comfortable silence and the warm feeling of Dream sitting by his side.

He was right, of course. Sapnap’s time was divided much more evenly between the two locations after that night, cut between helping out his friends around their house and hanging out in town, being extra hands at the bakery and bringing home his payment in bread or spending time with his boyfriend and his group of friends. In turn, Karl showed up on their doorstep more often, equally willing to get his hands dirty with whatever farm work they were doing or go explore a new area to see what they could find. By the end of the first year

of the pair's relationship, it was equally normal to come to the breakfast table to see the two at the breakfast table together blinking the bleary sleep from their eyes or to see a note left in Sapnap's handwriting telling them when he'd be back. With the youngest's frequent absence or infatuation, though, Dream and George only grew closer. Inside jokes were now shared between two instead of three, moments strung through with tension as they dealt with zombies on the edge of the farm or the simple trust that an extended hand would have the right tool placed into it without the need for words were permeated with the irrevocable sense of the other. Something was strung tight between them, thin threads tying them together and tugging on George's heart even when he tried to push the feeling of them away. There wasn't time to think about the strange feeling in his chest, wasn't a need when he could just suppress the fluttery beating and the strange way he felt like he couldn't breathe when he could feel Dream's touch warm against his skin.

It was the most mundane thing George could think of that brought about revelation, dragged his mind from sweet ignorance to the shuddering truth of what was building in his heart. He was in the kitchen, frosting a cake with three colors and swearing each time he looked at it and decided it wasn't even.

"Dream, can you come over here and look at this?" he asked, biting his lip as he leaned back and examined the wobbly lines. The taller boy walked over, sticking his finger in one of the bowls of extra frosting and licking it off as George scowled at him and he simply reached back for more. "Don't *eat* it, I still need to finish frosting."

"I think you're missing a little... here," he said, turning to wipe a long stripe of blue along George's cheek as he reeled back.

"*Dream!*" he gasped, indignant, immediately reaching into the yellow frosting and smearing a line across his neck in retaliation. It was like they were kids again, reminiscent of that birthday two years after they'd met, blobs of colorful sugar wielded like weapons as they laughed and dodged, flung and smeared, ducked out of the way of a projectile and stained their clothes with food dye. There was joy in their laughter, lacing the quips and jibes they threw back and forth, contained in the grin that George couldn't keep from his face if he tried and the way Dream's shoulders couldn't stop shaking with mirth. Eventually, though, as ammunition ran low and the energy settled down into a comfortable warmth, they grabbed for towels and started to clean themselves up, wiping icing from their skin and dabbing water on where it was staining their clothes.

George had grinned, turning towards where his friend was wiping the sticky sweetness off his mask with a joke on his tongue, a fond quip bubbling up to be flung in his friend's direction.



He could feel it at the tip of his tongue, mind starting to spin something to fill his intent, a slingshot with the rubber band pulled back but still unloaded with the actual ammunition of words.

*I could kiss you right now* , his brain supplied, and the gleeful expression froze on his face.

Gratefully, Dream didn't seem to notice the way the grin slipped from his cheeks, didn't see the existential crisis that was starting to break down in George's brain as he stared, eyes wide. His jaw clenched as he forced fake happiness back onto his face, a smile, a laugh as he offered Dream a damp paper towel to finish wiping up and forcibly returned his focus back to the cake he was frosting with shaking hands.

Processing was slow, each revelation like a heavy hit of a hammer to his lungs, knocking the air from him and sending an ache through his chest. This wasn't just the love of friends, of found family, of the simple and platonic any more. This wasn't just the care that was afforded to the person who had stood at his side for so long, wasn't just the bond they had forged through years and years of banding together to face the world. He knew what that felt like. He had Sapnap for that, had him for jesting and ribbing, for merciless teasing and laughter, had him for the strange feeling of warm protectiveness that sparked inside him when he looked at the younger boy. It wasn't the same for Dream.

Dream was now *want* . He wanted *for* Dream, he wanted *with* Dream, he wanted *Dream* . George *wanted* , the flickering fire in his chest begging to consume him, and it terrified him from the tips of his fingers to the depths of his soul.

George's head shot up. He needed to tell him. He couldn't indulge himself in their proximity, let the feelings feed off of the smallest of interactions as his friend unknowingly romanced him, take advantage of his blissful ignorance like that. Slowly, he opened his mouth to say something, trying to formulate the words he needed to say on his tongue when Sapnap and Karl's laughter burst from the living room, sweet and saccharine and loving. George felt his teeth click as his jaw snapped shut and he swallowed down his conviction. Now wasn't the time. He could wait.

They celebrated Sapnap's birthday that year with a red, blue, and yellow cake that had become tradition and recounted the story to the newest member of their little found family, of finding each other in the woods and mistakes made without goggles. As the candles blew out

and a kiss was pressed to the cheek of the birthday boy, George glanced at the mask beside him and tried not to feel the pang of jealousy echo in his gut.

## Chapter End Notes

Here, have some KarlNap and the proper beginnings of the DNF in this fic <3 I know it took a bit to actually hit the shippy stuff, but I wanted to develop this story and their connections a bit more, you know? Gradual build. Slow burn this bitch. FYI, this was originally supposed to be kinda a snapshot-compilation-fic with each segment starting with "George didn't question the mask", which I guess it still kinda is, but I've filled in much, much more of the between-bits than I was expecting to.

I like this chapter. Gotta love KarlNap fluff, gotta love the family dynamic of teasing the absolute shit out of your friends when they have a crush, gotta love characters falling for someone and not even realizing it until they have the "oh shit" moment. Like, granted, I think it only gets better from here on out, but this is a pretty good chapter.

So here's to you all who read this far, to those of you who are waiting to see more, to everyone and anyone who is bothering with this fic because I love and appreciate all of you so much. I have a lot of weird feelings about this being my longest fic to date, so seeing people subscribe and kudo this warms my heart so much. So if you want to leave a comment and chat with me, please, please feel free, and to anyone who leaves comments, kudos, and more- thank you <3

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Summary

Confessions and their fallout.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George didn't question the mask.

He didn't question it when Dream was standing in front of him, hands trembling where they held George's, the fishing pond reflecting the stars as the two of them steeped in the revelations that had poured unbidden from their mouths, years in the making.

"So you... you too?" asked Dream, voice tentative and painfully soft.

"I... yeah. Me too."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

They stood there for a few moments more, processing, trying to wrap their heads around it all.

"So," ventured Dream.

"So." There was a long pause. "... Do you have anything to follow that up?"

"I was hoping you did." Awkward, bashful smiles bloomed across their faces, flushed heat pouring into their cheeks and between their hands as they stood there, uncertain of where to go next, hesitancy on their tongues despite the initial fear of their confession going unreciprocated dissipating with their quiet affirmations.

"I guess... we do the dating thing?" Dream offered, one of his hands pulling back to awkwardly scratch at his neck. A bubble of laughter burst from George's lips.

"Do the dating thing'?"

"I mean, what else do you want to call it?"

"Not that?" he offered, earning a few chuckles from the masked boy in front of him.

"Okay, then, you do better."

"Dream," George asked, stepping forwards and tugging on the hand still in his with a smile plastered across his face, words slipping out easily now that they had fallen back into their comfortable banter, "can I take you on a date?"

"Maybe," the taller man said in return, and George could hear the grin on his voice. "Depends. Can I call you my boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"Hmm... I'll have to think about it."

"*Dream!*" he cried, taking a step back, his jaw dropped dramatically slack as he fought to keep the happiness off of his face for the mock hurt.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” the younger man laughed, tugging him back in, pulling him closer. “Yes, Georgie, you can take me on a date.”

“Good,” he said, a smirk on his lips. “It’d be really weird if my boyfriend didn’t let me take him out.” There was a pause as they stood there, fingers intertwined, softly sending little pulses of affection back and forth as they squeezed the other’s fingers with their own. Finally, after enough quiet had passed, he gave a gentle tug and took a step towards the path, asking, “Home?” Dream nodded and they set off down the dirt road to their house, fingers still interlocked between them and George leading the way through the wooded area, the familiar shadows of dark trunks and branches twisting around them. They were almost to the edge of the treeline when the younger boy slowed, the lights pouring from the house windows lighting the area in a warm glow that faded just a few feet from where they stood.

“Uh, George?” asked Dream, and the shorter boy stopped, face falling into concern as he heard the tone of his boyfriend’s voice. He felt the hand in his drawing him back to face the blankness of the mask and swallowed, the earlier worry surging back into his body full-force.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um, well... sh-should I-” Dream’s free hand moved to gesture up at the mask with a terse, sharp motion. Heart in his throat, George’s gaze flickered over the figure before him, taking in how the other boy’s entire body was tensed as if to run, from where his hand wrapped painfully tight around his own to his too-tight shoulders held militarily stiff.

“No.” The word was out of his mouth before he could stop it. “No, don’t- don’t make yourself uncomfortable for my sake.” He paused as he looked up into the blank eyes of the mask, sure that beneath there was agonizing worry. “It’s okay. You don’t have to. Not for me.”

“Oh. O-okay.” The words were more a gasp than speech, more air than substance as they breathed out with the tension. Shoulders slumped back down and the grip relaxed as Dream took a slow, shuddery breath that rasped with the dampness of tears. In the back of George’s head, a piece clicked into place, how his boyfriend had been trailing behind him, following, grip around his fingers slowly increasing in pressure as the tension of what he thought he had to do built in his mind. “Okay,” the masked man repeated, quietly, almost to himself.

"If you *want* to-" George added in quickly, cutting himself off as he heard the eagerness and desperation start to thread through his words, biting down on the want inside him to satiate the curiosity that had been brewing for too long now. "Just don't do it because of me," he amended softly, reaching out and squeezing his new boyfriend's hands in his own. "Do it because you want to, not just- not because you think you have to. I don't want to force you." His thumbs stroked soothing lines down the back of Dream's hands as he looked down at them, warmth dusting his cheeks. "I'd love to see you, but I'll wait until you're ready. I don't mind waiting for you." The lie slipped out easily, his heart screaming *traitor!* as he looked back up and felt the pang of want reflected back at him in the mask.

"Okay," came the whisper from behind the white plastic, thick and heavy with shuddering breaths as he moved to gather George into his arms instead, holding him tight to his chest and placing his chin atop his head. If he noticed a few tears trickling down to dampen his hair or the slight shaking of shoulders from the boy wrapped around him, he didn't say, just pressed himself closer and held that much tighter as they stood there, wrapped in each other's arms, together beneath the night.

George didn't question the mask.

Questions and pondering were for the long, quiet moments of contemplation that happened over monotonous tasks or late in the night, the quiet of empty rooms and musing thoughts and the filling of space with your own mind. Now that his mornings were filled with quick hugs and casual touches, his days were filled with intertwined fingers and infectious laughter, his nights coasting on the warmth that sweet, extended *goodnight* s left warm and fuzzy in his chest, there was none of that empty space to fill. It was happiness, contentedness, joy in the simplest reminders that he loved and was loved in return.

Sapnap had noticed in under a minute flat. They hadn't discussed whether or not they would tell him, but when Dream let his hand trail over his boyfriend's shoulders as he sat slumped at the kitchen table, blinking the sleep out of his eyes and letting the warmest, gooeyest smile slide across his face at the contact, the youngest of their group had grinned, crossing his arms and leaning back into his chair.

"Took you guys long enough."

That woke George up. Head snapping up, he glanced between the smug smirk sitting across the table and his stock-still boyfriend frozen with a bear claw in his hand.

"Uh, what?" he asked, croaky morning voice breaking up the words as he tried- and failed, it was *too early* for this- to play it off like it was nothing.

"I owe Karl a dinner date now, thanks guys," Sapnap scoffed, shaking his head. "It's been *years* of you guys pining, couldn't you have waited another, like, three months?" George glanced over at his boyfriend, jaw slack, head spinning as he tried to process. Silence claimed the kitchen as the two of them looked between each other and their friend, minds spinning as he rolled his eyes and walked past Dream's frozen form, grabbing his breakfast from the counter and heading back to settle in his chair again. "Come on, guys, I'm not blind."

"Years?" asked Dream, recovering first, and George could feel heat rushing to his cheeks at the tone. He could feel the amusement in the words, something a little satisfied warming them and making them soft and sweet even when laced through with the light, teasing tone. "Aww, Georgie, you were pining for me for *years*?"

"Oh, don't act all high and mighty," scoffed the youngest, rolling his eyes as he tore off a piece of muffin and popped it in his mouth, talking as he chewed, "you were definitely worse."

"I- wait, what?!"

"Oh, come on. You might have the mask on, but you could be a little more subtle with the long, wistful staring. Or maybe checking him out," he tacked on with a shrug. "I don't know. *That* was hidden, at least." Now it was George's turn to be smug, grinning as he watched the exchange.

"Did you see something you like, Dream?"

"*What?!*"

“Oh god, the flirting is coming out in full force. I think this is my cue to leave,” Sappnap laughed, shoving the rest of the muffin in his mouth. “I’m going to go tell Karl I owe him. See you lovebirds tonight.” He rolled his eyes as he strode to the front door, only stopping to poke his head back in and quip “Use protection!” with a wicked grin across his face. The door slammed on their sputtering, and the two were left in the relative quiet of the kitchen.

When Sappnap had returned that night it was as if nothing had ever changed, and George was grateful. The three continued their usual routines, working together to keep their lives moving forward, farming and mining and exploring as they had before he and Dream had stumbled into their late-night confessions. The only difference now was the casual touches, the quick hugs that happened just because they felt like it, the easy loss of personal space when they were around each other. It was the way that when one of them woke up first, he prepped two servings of breakfast, or when one fell asleep on the couch in mid-afternoon sunlight, warm and sleepy, they would always find a blanket draped over them upon waking up. Occasionally, their friend would roll his eyes and make a snide quip or comment, but it was always with humor and a quick smile. They’d just laugh it off together and ease up on the affection and flirting a bit, giving Sappnap a reprieve from any feelings of being the third wheel.

George quickly learned how much he loved casual affection. Walking into town together with fingers intertwined left him with a saccharine feeling dripping from his chest, making his breaths sticky and thick with it. The subconscious way their hands stretched for each other, the soft bumps of hips and sides and shoulders as they let their spaces drift and overlap into what would have once been too close, how neatly their bodies seemed to fit into each other’s with intertwined fingers and gentle cuddles all filled him with a joy he couldn’t put into words but simply floated on, serene and perfectly, wonderfully happy.

It wasn’t perfect, by any means. There were still hiccups of figuring out boundaries, of parsing what they each wanted from each other and what they could provide, of figuring out how to *relationship* properly for the first time in their lives. Little bumps in the road as George got jealous of a witty, clever boy with orange hair and a sneaky grin asking his boyfriend if he’d like to see a movie, and said boyfriend, not realizing it was an offer for a date, saying yes. A little pause of hurt after Dream waited through a sunrise, alone, as his boyfriend overslept. After every argument, though, after each time someone snapped or feelings got hurt, they found themselves sitting on the living room couch. They would talk, and slowly, two people pushed to the opposite ends of the furniture would find their knees bumping, hands gently resting on the other’s, legs overlapping as they eventually fell back together, words passing between them bringing understanding and change.

Through all of it, Dream kept the mask. He’d gotten a bit more relaxed with it, no longer jumping to reposition it more perfectly each time it shifted so much as a millimeter, but



George still had yet to see more than the barest sliver of his own boyfriend's face. He could play the sound of the masked boy's laugh like a record in his head, pull his voice from a crowd with ease, feel a hand on his shoulder or waist and know in an instant who was there. He had murmured reassurances to a choked, sobbing voice that came out muffled by a plastic barrier between them, run his finger under his chin to wipe away the tears collecting there, pressed kisses to where the hem of a hood gave way to a mess of sandy hair. Yet if Dream decided to take off the disguise and slip into a crowd, the older boy would have never been able to find him.

The thoughts chewed in the back of his mind sometimes, gnawed at him with worry and anxiousness, but when warm arms slipped around his torso and a chin moved to rest on his shoulder or fingers threaded their way through his own and tugged him close, they were banished back to the dark corners they had come from and he let himself bask in the blissful happiness of being with his partner.

George didn't question the mask.

Even when he wanted to. Right here, right now, he desperately wanted to. It had been a long day for them, farming for the first half and mining for the second, and both boys were bone-tired by the time they got home and found food on the counter with a note from Sapnap saying he was spending the night with Karl. They'd taken turns cleaning up, scrubbing the soil and dirt and dust from where it had caked to their skin with sweat before settling down on the couch, lukewarm bowls of soup in hand because neither of them wanted to go through the trouble of starting a fire to heat it. After eating in near silence, Dream had placed his empty bowl on the small table in front of them and let himself flop down, his legs kicked over the armrest and his head pillowed in George's lap, mask staring blankly up at his boyfriend as he finished his meal.

"Hey, handsome," the boy in his lap hummed, the words blurred with exhaustion.

"Hey, you," George said back, a warm smile

"'You'? That's all I get? Georgie, you wound me," his boyfriend gasped, over-dramatically grabbing at his chest in mock pain.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a light laugh, “what would you like me to call you? Honeypie? Hot stuff? Stud-muffin?” Each pet name fell from his lips on a puff of air, a guffaw of humor and he felt the revulsion as tension rolled through the pair of shoulders leaning on his legs.

“Any and all of the above, please,” Dream responded anyways, amusement lacing his voice as he reached out to steal his boyfriend’s hand, overlapping it with his and lacing his fingers in the spaces between George’s own. He moved it to settle on his chest, just over the pulsing beat of his heart, a warm hum of contentment sliding from between pressed lips as he relaxed into a puddle in his boyfriend’s lap. George smiled softly and then froze, body tensing and fingers curling a little tighter around Dreams.

In that moment, it was like a flash of lightning had struck him. Sharp realization coursing through his body, like something had clicked into place and the floodgates had opened, washing him with feeling. He wanted to kiss the boy in his lap. He *desperately* wanted to kiss him. He wanted to slip his fingers under the edge of the white plastic and tug it up so he could press their lips together, slide fingers up along his jawline and caress his cheek, bend down and kiss him with every little wisp and shred of adoration that was swelling in his chest. He wanted to press their foreheads together and feel the warmth of his boyfriend, his person so gently and intimately close to him.

“... George?” The voice coming up from his lap was no longer laced with sleep and affection, but lowered and tense. Shaking himself out of the wide-eyed shock and stupor, he blinked down at his boyfriend and felt a soft squeeze of his hand in response. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” he said softly, smiling and returning the squeeze, forcing a small smile across his face and his body to relax again. He knew he could keep himself in check, swallow down the desire and bite his lip, wait for his partner to reach the comfort he needed to allow him into that extra space, that extra piece of intimacy that he wanted. “Everything is fine,” he lied, taking a deep breath and steeling himself against the desires bubbling up inside his chest and tingling along the soft skin of his lips, “just rest.”

They fell asleep like that. George woke half-slumped down on the couch, his boyfriend’s head still pillowed in his lap, hair mussed and messy and the mask askew to reveal just the barest hint of freckles along the edge of his cheekbone, the corner of an eye and the flutter of soft lashes. Immediately, he could feel the thudding of his heart, in his chest, in the veins of his neck, in the small, shuddery breath it pulled from him. Slowly, he raised a slightly shaking hand and reached out, movements slow and small as to not wake the man sleeping atop him. It would be so easy to push it aside, to blame restless sleep and shifting bodies, to press his hand to his boyfriend's cheek, to finally look into the eyes of the person he'd been

travelling with for nearly half his life and see him, all of him, for the first time. It would be so easy.

Gently, the hand came to settle on the mask and slid it back down to cover the little sliver of Dream's exposed face once more.

"George?" mumbled the voice behind the mask, tongue and lips still heavy and fumbling with sleep.

"It's nothing, Dream, go back to sleep." There was a contented hum of agreement as the boy in his lap rolled over so the smooth plastic pressed against George's stomach, breathing evening and slowing as he quickly slid back into sleep, seemingly unaware of the wild pounding of his boyfriend's heart. Slowly, the elder boy brought his hand up to run soft strokes over where the hoodie covered the crown of Dream's head, gently soothing him as his mind wandered, wondered, wished he knew. His hand settled, thumb still moving as he wished he was threading his hands through his boyfriend's hair instead, gently scratching at the scalp as the repetitive motion lulled him to sleep as well.

*Little sacrifices* , he thought as the grey cloud of sleep welled up to claim him once more, *little sacrifices for love* .

George didn't question the mask.

Sapnap, however, had no such reservations.

"You've *never* seen his face?" he asked, aghast as he stared over at George, half-eaten breakfast forgotten before him. "I just figured- like me, fine, whatever, maybe he's self conscious or something, but you two are *dating* . I thought- like, back room makeout session or something, I don't know." His voice was a scoff, incredulous and confused as he shook his head and ran a hand over his forehead, sliding off his bandana with the smooth motion. "Don't you *want* to know what your boyfriend looks like?"

"I don't know. It's weird, but I'm not- I'm not going to push him."

“Have you even asked?” George paused at the counter and looked back over to where his friend was retying his white bandana over his forehead, pulling the black bangs up over the edge before his eyes caught the wide-eyed stare. “... come on, man, never?”

“... no.”

“Don’t you want to, like, kiss him or something?” Before the other man could even respond in the affirmative he continued, “I dunno, man, I didn’t want to start something. If you guys are happy, good for you, you know?”

“Yeah.” The voice that dropped the single word from between lax lips was soft, almost contemplative as he rolled the thought over in his head. Asking *once* wasn’t pushing, right? At the same time, though, he didn’t want to be the one to push too hard, push too far and make his boyfriend upset or uncomfortable. The mask was there for a reason, whatever that was, and George had always respected that. But was asking without pushing really going to cross a line?

The quiet drew long between the two men in the room, and after a moment there was the sound of the kitchen chair being pushed away from the table and a soft throat clear as Sapnap awkwardly stood.

“Okay, well, I’ve gotta go. Karl’s been going on about some surprise he wants to show me, and if I’m late he’ll give me shit, so, uh- see ya.”

“See ya, Sapnap,” he responded, voice monotone and instinctual as he stared into the middle distance, eyes unfocused. He had definitely thought about kissing Dream before. It wasn’t uncommon for the temptation of slipping the mask up just a few inches to press his lips against the ones hidden beneath to slip into his mind, wander into the corners of his thoughts unbidden. The thought of lips or a jawline pressing against his forehead when he was wrapped in his boyfriend’s arms instead of the smooth, cool sensation of the mask pressing against the skin was almost intoxicating, the thought of looking deep into his love’s eyes as they sat under the stars together and seeing the wonder and joy flitting across his face rather than the mute monotone of the mask’s expression a mere fantasy at the edge of his hopes and desires.

The thoughts plagued him when his boyfriend walked out to join him in the room and trailed his hand over the span of his shoulders as he passed. They tormented him as they dug deep in the mines for materials, the light from the torches dancing across the smooth white surface of the item he wanted desperately to see beneath. They danced around his mind, muddled his thoughts, twisted his rationale as they came back home together and ate dinner, the burning need kept neatly repressed in his chest.

Sleep came fitfully, with dreams of an empty void of blackness, a pit of darkness hidden behind smooth white plastic, a vacuum of space that sucked him down until he was drowning in it. The morning came with a gasp and a hand clutching at his throat, and as he stepped into the kitchen he could feel the bags beneath his eyes.

The new need gnawing at him wouldn't leave him alone. He could feel it harping at him at every opportunity, when they were gardening and dirt and mud marred the clean white surface, when they were cooking and he wished for kisses to clean off the smudge of chocolate on his cheek rather than a caressing thumb, when they sat on the couch doing nothing but resting and indulging in the other's company. It ground at his senses, a constant reminder of what he didn't have and wanted, wanted, *wanted*. He could feel himself pining, feel himself slipping into desperate need and desire as his sleep started to slip away, dreams of what lay beneath his Dream's mask twisting and taunting him. Flickers of scarred, twisted, marred features burned and mauled by raider fire and blades, things unearthly and inhuman in nature mixed with the other type of dreams, the type that were vastly more familiar to his teenage self than he was now, the ones where the face that looked back burned fire in his belly and lips met lips, met jawline, met the curve of his neck, met more.

"George?"

Startling, he looked up at his boyfriend from where he'd sat relaxing against him, slowly drifting off with his cheek pressed to the soft green fabric of the hoodie that adorned his love. George blinked a few times, trying to push the sleep out of his tired eyes as he hummed a questioning sound, not bothering to articulate words as he turned his head and looked at the damned mask before him.

"Are you okay?" Slowly, he tilted his head in further question, eyes squinting slightly as he focused. "You've been really tired recently. Do you feel sick? Should we go into town and get you checked out?"

“No, no, I just haven’t been sleeping well,” he admitted, voice soft. *Don’t ask why*, he pleaded silently, lips pressed tightly together.

“Why?”

George didn’t question the mask.

He did, however, finally break and ask to see beneath it.

The quiet drew out too long after the question, and he could feel the mounting tension in the chest he was leaning on. He couldn't see the face beneath the mask, but he could feel the arm around him tighten, the fingers on his side subconsciously flex, the slight shift as Dream angled himself to look more directly at his boyfriend's conflicted expression. His face was twisted, mouth gaping for words, for explanation that could placate, but everything slipped away in his desperation for the truth.

“It... it doesn’t have to be now, and it doesn’t have to be soon, but... when you’re ready, can I see your face?” George's voice was small, barely above a whisper, and there was a soft pause as his boyfriend froze in place. He didn't shift, didn't tense but instead remained unmoving, shock-still at the question. The paralysis lingered, held for a moment too long to be natural before it faded, motion restored as he shifted back to hold the boy in his arms closer.

“Yeah. Of course, Georgie. You’ll be the first one.”

Dream carefully slotted himself around George, pulling him half onto his lap, arms squeezing tightly around his middle and resting his chin on the crown of his boyfriend’s head. There was a long pause of hesitation before one of the hands retracted and with a slight shift, a pair of lips pressed to dark hair, a brief moment of intimacy before the mask slid down again and the arm wrapped back around, settling back into their comfortable cuddle, the quiet settled between them as the ghost of lips burned their mark into him. It felt like a promise.

George didn’t question the mask.

Not any more. He had asked, Dream had answered, and now all there was left to do was wait. The ball was in his boyfriend's court. His chest ached a little each day he said goodnight to the blank slate hiding away what he wanted to see, each time his fingers tingled with want to reach out and caress a cheek or his lips burned with need to press against his boyfriend's. Now that he had asked, he realized how much he wanted this. The reasons were indescribable, just a tugging wanting burn just to the left of his sternum, but the pang only increased the longer the question hung between them.

For a moment, George couldn't help but wonder if he had forgotten.

It was nearly two and a half weeks after, and there was a deep frustration brewing in his gut. Maybe it was that the dreams hadn't stopped or the thoughts still lingered in the periphery. Maybe it was the waiting for so long, or the fact that he had moved to kiss his boyfriend on the cheek when he and Sapnap had left for town and only caught himself after it was apparent to the other two what he was doing, or that when they did make it into town Karl had practically tackled his boyfriend with a kiss pressed to the lips and an excited giggle that sent jealousy surging through George, but something was churning in his stomach as he placed the bag of loaves from the bakery on the table. The house would at least just be his and Dream's that night, but as he passed his boyfriend's open door he saw it was strangely empty.

Instead of being in his own room, though, or even waiting for George in his, there was a note on the blue sheets of the bed.

*Meet me by the fishing spot? :)*

George swallowed and folded the paper into his pocket, heart beating like the panicked flutter of a hummingbird's wings, and prayed he was right about what was waiting for him.

Dream was standing at the water's edge, fishing pole sitting next to him and not even cast. It was laying off to the side, the area conspicuously absent of any bait or fish, the river lazily winding past the expressionless gaze of the mask. Making sure to make a few branches rustle as he approached, George approached his boyfriend and gently slipped his fingers between the masked man's trembling digits. There was a soft squeeze around his fingers, though the expressionless face didn't turn to look at him. A slow, shaky breath shuddered its way into a set of lungs.

“I think... I think I’m ready,” the taller boy said, his voice trembling nearly as much as his hands. Nodding, George gave a gentle squeeze of encouragement and hoped it communicated the leap his heart made as the words settled in his ears. Slowly, the fingers detangled themselves as Dream turned to face him fully, shaking hands raising to the smooth plastic. Fingertips catching under the edge mirrored the way George’s breath caught in his throat, the utter silence letting him listen to exactly how fast and hard his heart was hammering in his chest.

The mask slid back, and for a moment neither of them were breathing. His mind was spinning a million miles an hour, and the first thought that settled in his mind after a fleeting worry that he should have brought his colorblind goggles was...

*It’s... a face. Dream has a face .* George wasn’t entirely sure what he expected in this moment- something dramatic, perhaps, something that struck him in his chest with *feeling* . He wasn’t sure if he was expecting to be swept off his feet by chiseled cheekbones and a sharp jawline that set his heart racing double-time or reeling back in horror from burn scars that rivaled the phantom of the opera and gaunt features that screamed of dread and horror, but he was expecting *something* and as his gaze swept back up into soft eyes as the moment broke open between them, he... didn’t. The man before him was simply a man, and as much as his mind tried to swirl for meaning or depth all he could find was a single word. *Okay* . His mouth opened slightly, as if trying to prepare a comment, and in a sudden rush the sheer absurdity of the moment flooded over him. There was a man standing before him, a shitty plastic mask in his hands, the tension in the air between them impossibly taut, and a perfectly normal, serviceable, simple face staring at him and he couldn’t help himself any more and the moment snapped as he bent double, cackling.

Immediately, the anticipation on the edge of upturned lips and the hope in wide eyes contorted into something ugly and hurt as the mask moved to cover up his features once more, hiding himself again and despite the fact that he couldn’t seem to make the stream of giggles and guffaws stop George felt a pang in his chest.

“No- no, no, I’m not laughing at you, I swear, it’s just-” he said, hands reaching up and fingers curling around the edges of the white barrier between them, tugging it back away as he tried to mute his laughter and quell the wide grin splitting his face.

“You know, if you thought it was- I was disappointing or whatever, you could have just said so-”



“No, Dream, it’s not-”

“George, give it *back!*” he snapped, yanking hard enough on the thing that had shielded him that his friend could feel the edge of it scrape along the pads of his fingers as it was torn from his grip. Almost immediately, the smooth white surface was pressed back over the torn and twisting features that had only just been revealed. The band slipped over the already mussed hair, securing the mask in place as the man turned on his heel and stepped away, all but running in his movements, brisk pace and stiff shoulders screaming of the barely contained emotion held in his clenched fists.

“*Dream!*” George could feel his voice strain as he cried his boyfriend’s name, the laughter and amusement dying as he reached out and tried to catch his fingers in the loose fabric of the green hoodie but only found air. “Dream, no, I-”

"I'll see you back at the house, George."

Before he could protest, his boyfriend had whisked himself away and back down the path, disappearing into the trees before he could summon the words he needed to his tongue. The man was left there, hand reaching out, fingers curled lightly around air, uncertain of what exactly had just transpired. His head was muddled, spinning with the built tension and emotional whiplash of the moment, and for a moment all he could focus on was a fishing rod laying on the ground, unused.

Numbly, he picked it up and began walking home.

The front door was unlocked, and he stepped in to find all of the lights out. The fishing rod was dropped on the counter without a second thought as he made his way up the stairs, glancing to his and Sapnap’s open doors and empty rooms before coming to stand before the closed door to his boyfriend’s, a lump rising in his throat as he raised a hand and knocked once, twice.

“Dream?” he asked, his hand sliding open to rest its palm against the smooth wood of the door. He could hear the shift of a body under the sheets and took a shaky breath. “I’m sorry I laughed. It- it wasn’t cool of me, I know, and I’m sorry-”

“I don’t want to talk right now.” Slowly, a shuddering breath of relief passed between the brunet’s lips as his shoulders lost their tension and he leaned forward to lightly tap his forehead against the wooden door. Something terrified had been flitting in his chest, worries unknown and indescribable until it was calmed by the fact that Dream was still here. He was here, and he hadn’t disappeared, and he hadn’t lost him. *Not yet* .

“Dream-”

“Good *night* , George,” snapped the voice from inside the room, cold and hard with a hint of a pained break at the end of his name, and George swallowed, his eyes squeezed shut and brows bunched tight together.

“Sleep on it, talk tomorrow?” His voice was softer now, barely loud enough that the boy inside the room could hear it. It was the measured volume he perfected on nights where he stole away into the room to be bundled up in arms underneath the moonlight, voices hushed and low to not wake their roommate, a magnitude of sound that invoked the quiet intimacy of the evening darkness. He held there, hand splayed open on the cool wood warming beneath his touch and waited, ache building in his chest.

“Tomorrow,” came the reply, and he blinked away the tears in his eyes as he turned to walk away.

## Chapter End Notes

"Never go to bed angry" is the dumbest advice I've ever heard in my life. When emotions run high, sometimes you need to cool down so you don't say things you don't mean. And sometimes that means getting some goddamn sleep in your body. Go to bed angry. Go take an hour, two, three, the whole night, a whole day and talk about it when you're no longer in the heat of things. Agree to talk later, and follow through, and it will likely be better than when everything is dialed up to 100.

Lowkey personal rant there, but hey! All of this is done! All of it is written and I am fairly proud of myself so instead of waiting a full week like I told myself I would you guys are getting this chapter a few days early. We just have the last chapter with the fallout of this... well, we'll go with *situation* and we're done! My longest fic, wrapped up and in the books. Love all of you for reading and kudos-ing and subscribing and

commenting, interactions are absolutely the best part of writing fanfic for people. See you next week with the last chapter!

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

CW: A few-paragraph description of a panic attack!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George didn't question the mask.

He had almost expected to see it rather than the face that flickered in his memory, even though it hurt to see the blank smile that covered what he knew were red-rubbed eyes with bags beneath them. Understanding why didn't lessen the pain in his chest. It still ached to see the smooth white surface peeking from beneath the raised hood rather than the wide eyes that he'd met the night before, the cheeks mixed with freckles and little, pockmarked acne scars alike, the smooth curves of his cheekbones and jawline, the whole image simple but so much more human than the image that blocked him out now. Breakfast was quiet, but the tension and simmering anger had leached away in the night, the virulent intensity of emotions mellowing out with rest no matter how restless it had been. They sat at the table and nibbled on pastries, George deliberately avoiding looking in his boyfriend's direction and wondering if beneath the mask, he was doing the same as he slipped pieces of a croissant under the mask's edge. As they finished, they sat there, quiet and numb, staring at empty plates in a stalemate of who would act first.

"So-" George finally started, the word rasping with phlegm before he stopped and cleared the morning from his voice with a cough. "So, are you ready to... to talk?" The pause that followed the question felt like it lasted for eternities, felt like the world had frozen for a moment before finally, finally a small voice spoke behind the mask.

"I don't know."

"Okay," he said softly. "Okay. Tell me when you're ready?"

"Yeah." The sound of the chair pushing against the floor scratched into George's ears as he watched Dream leave the room, watched with nausea building in his gut and panic throbbing

in his ears. For a moment, he couldn't breathe, which made no sense. He wasn't dead yet, his heart was still beating loudly in his chest- *so* loudly, that couldn't possibly be normal- so how could it feel like there was no air in his lungs, none passing through his windpipe, the ache prominent in his chest and choking out his throat? Now that he was cognizant of it, he forced a single, shuddery, deep breath into his body, one that swelled in his chest and almost hurt as much as the ache from before did, and in that moment he realized he couldn't stay in that room.

The front door opened under his touch before he realized he was moving, and as he stepped out into the fresh air, he forced himself to breathe.

He only slipped back inside when the growl of his stomach became loud enough for the animals he was watching to perk up at the noise. It was a late lunch, if he was being technical about it. He hadn't eaten since the morning, so even though the sun was rapidly making its way from afternoon towards evening he was putting together a sandwich and pretending that he hadn't just spent too long in their garden watching the local rabbits stealing their food. Careful, forcibly steadied hands cut his meal in two and he moved back to the table, seeing his seat still pulled multiple feet away from the table where he had stumbled towards the door all those hours ago. After what was probably too long of a pause staring at unmoving furniture, he moved to sit in Sapnap's seat instead. Slowly forcing himself to eat, not even processing the flavor of the food he'd made himself, he tried not to think about the quiet that had lingered through the day that had followed him to the table that was so often filled with chatter and laughter and the sound of the family he'd found.

"Can we talk?" George swallowed, hard. Slowly, he turned in the chair to face where his boyfriend stood in the doorway, leaning against the wall, masked face decidedly looking away from him and looking somehow even more disheveled than he had that morning. He could feel the terror pumping through his veins alongside the strange flood of relief that Dream was talking to him at all, the strange contrast building a lump in his throat and choking him on it.

"Yeah. Do you want to start?" he managed.

"I don't know... I'm not sure if I have much to say."

"Yeah." The word came out more like a sigh than a statement, a soft breath of uncertain air. "This one is on me." Slowly, he looked up to his boyfriend, trying to swallow down the

churning in his gut and the way all his nerves felt like live wires. "Can we go sit in the living room?" Dream nodded, turning away to the larger room, moving to settle into the couch as George stood, feeling the shaking weakness in his legs as he made his way to follow.

Dream settled on one end of the couch, back against the armrest and legs crossed in front of him, one knee pushing awkwardly into the cushions and the other hanging off the edge as he anxiously twisted his hands in between them, fingers kneading and rolling over themselves and each other with the motion. Carefully, George moved onto the other end of the couch, pulling his knees into his chest and having a flickering memory of so many years ago, his back pressed to a dirt wall as he stared at a paper plate mask, his heart beating with a different taste of terror. He squeezed his arms around his knees, taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, trying not to falter as he brought his gaze up to stare into the blankness of the mask in front of him.

"I didn't mean to laugh," he started, but was immediately cut off by a scoff.

"Of course you didn't '*mean to*'," Dream snapped, the words spitting hurt and bitter from his tongue as he mocked the phrasing, his hands balled up in his lap. George had to stop himself from trying to reach out and soothe the tension with touch. "But you still did."

"I- yeah, okay, bad phrasing." Taking a deep breath, he started again. "I'm sorry I laughed. I'm sorry that I made you feel like crap, because obviously this was a big deal to you." He could feel his mouth hanging open as he sought out his next words, tried to formulate the eloquence he needed on his tongue before his spinning mind was cut off and dragged from its frenzied search.

"It wasn't to you?" George froze at the words, so much softer than the last ones had been, something tender and aching and broken held in them, like the revelation had stabbed a knife deep into Dream's gut and this was all he could muster.

"No- no, no, no, that was the *problem*," he tried to explain. Shifting forwards, knees splitting so he could reach out between them, his hands moved placatingly in the space between where they were sitting, letting the barest tips of his fingers brush against Dream's and freezing when he flinched, holding himself still until the tension eased. "I laughed because it was such a big deal. It wasn't you, or how you looked, or- or any of that. It was all the buildup. *Years* of buildup, Dream, literally *years*," he said with a slight smile moving the corners of his lips up. "We've known each other for what, ten years? Over that. Fuck, I mean, Sapp's known us

for more of his life than he hasn't. We started dating, and I didn't know what my boyfriend's face looked like." He could feel the fidget in Dream's fingers before he said it, feel the way the comment rolled over the both of them and flinched at his own words before continuing, voice smaller and apologetic, "Builds up the fanfare a bit, right?"

"Right," Dream said back slowly, like he was feeling out every note of the word on his tongue, an air of puzzlement still lingering in his voice despite the affirmation.

"So when I'm worried that there's a big, mysterious reason you're keeping yourself hidden... it just felt kind of ridiculous when you took off the mask and were just a person, you know?" The mask tilted and George let out a soft peal of laughter. "Like, I don't know. Maybe I was expecting the Phantom of the Opera. Or a zombie, or- *something*, just something that was wildly unexpected." His face flushed as his mind wandered to the other side of the scale, of the face that he'd imagined would fit a model and shook his head slightly to clear it. *He doesn't have to know about any of that.* Slowly, he took another deep breath and continued, "So when you showed your face to me and it wasn't something terrible or strange or out there, all that buildup just became..."

"Ridiculous," Dream said, finishing the sentence for him.

"Yeah."

"But you don't think I- it's not-" he stuttered, trying to find the phrasing he wanted through raspy breaths and stuttered statements that never fully resolved.

"No, I wasn't laughing at your face," he promised, holding eye contact with the blankness staring back at him, the dumb smiley face that was keeping him locked out once again. A small smile tugged at the corners of his lips as he added, "You're all I could have ever *Dream-*ed of."

A little bubble of pride swelled in George's chest as a thin wheeze of laughter met the joke, the soft touch of fingertips pulling away as they instead moved to slide under the edges of the mask, shaking slightly and pausing, trembling beneath a patient gaze before slowly, carefully sliding it back. The pride bloomed into warmth, spreading in a smile across his lips as Dream's face came into view, red-rubbed eyes and a hesitant, weak smile of his own to greet him.

"Not bad?" he asked, a waver in the words.

"Not bad at all," George reassured. "I don't know why you were so worried in the first place." His boyfriend nodded slowly, hand moving up to pull the green hood away from his dirty blond hair, eyes looking almost anywhere but the man in front of him as George did the same, skimming his gaze over the nervous, fidgeting fingers or the small gap between their knees where they sat. The quiet danced between nerve-wracking and comforting, comfortable contemplation and silence from the electricity coursing anxiously through their veins. For a long while, it seemed like neither was going to break it.

"Why did you never ask?" Dream finally asked, his voice hushed and quiet, eyes affixed to the piece of plastic in his lap, under his fingers. "All these years, and you just never asked... you know, *why* ." Nodding slightly, almost subconsciously, George let his mind wander back. He'd rarely even articulated the question to himself, rarely let his introspection run that deep, and though the feeling was there, low in his gut, articulating it was another matter altogether.

"I... I didn't want to pry," he said slowly. "I didn't- I didn't want to make you uncomfortable, or push you into something you didn't want to do, and if I asked-"

He swallowed and looked evenly into his boyfriend's eyes, his heart pounding in his ears, in his hands, in his chest as he reached out and moved to skim fingertips over the back of Dream's hands, sliding over his boyfriend's skin as he slowly let weight sink into the touch and curl his fingers around the curve of them. A beat passed between them, and George's breath caught in his throat as he felt the gentle turn of them in his hands, slowly guiding their palms together and giving the slightest, tiniest squeeze of permission.

"Ask."

George didn't question the mask, until one day, he did.

"Why do you wear it?" he asked, words falling easily from his lips as he looked up from their intertwined touch to the face he'd been seeking for so long. "You look... there's nothing wrong with your face, you know?" Dream's face cracked into a slight smile and a soft puff of



air huffed from his nose, amused as his eyes slipped away from where they met his boyfriend's.

"I was a dumb kid on my own. Me against the world, right? I thought it was, like, badass or something, I don't know." Immediately, a bubble of laughter burst from George's lips, memories of the dirty, shitty paper plate strapped to the face of a ten-year-old kid flickering through his mind, the smile crooked and the ink bleeding whenever it would rain. His boyfriend scoffed, mock-offended as his hands pulled away and he instead reached out and shoved him where he was rocking back and forth in his mirth. "Shut up, you were plenty stupid, too! Do I need to remind you of the time-"

"No, no, we don't need to- go on, you were talking about how badass your mask was?"

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbled, shaking his head. "I thought it was the shit, all mysterious or whatever. And then I stumbled across you, and you just... didn't question it. Like you asked me a *million* questions that first night, and none of them were about the mask. Then we picked up Sapnap, and *he* didn't question it, and then by the time the dumb kid thoughts of being 'cool' had faded we were in puberty and the last thing you want for the first time your friends see your face is acne." Dream's lips tilted up, eyes seeking George's with his soft attempt at levity and received a soft smile in return and a nod encouraging him to go on. "So by the time *that* cleared up, I liked you, and from then on it was just... self-consciousness. What if you didn't like me? What if you thought I was ugly, or just," he shrugged, mouth twisting and eyes shifting away to the side, "weren't attracted to me, you know?" He swallowed and dragged his gaze back up to his boyfriend. "Wasn't worth it until you asked." They shared a small smile as something warm bloomed in George's chest at the sight.

"I'm glad I asked," he said softly. "I didn't want to push you."

"And damn you for that," Dream chuckled, hand awkwardly raising to scratch at his scalp, eyes darting to look away as his smile slanted sideways in a mirror of how his boyfriend's head tilted.

"Did you *want* me to push you?" There was a soft moment of pause as memories played across his mind of trembling hands and assumed responsibilities, of squeezing fingers and promises his heart had cursed at him for keeping. "When we decided we were going to... *this*, did you want me to push you?"

“Maybe? I don’t know.” George let the moment draw out as his boyfriend mused, fingers moving back to mess with the mask in his hands. “I think I didn’t want to be the one who had to make the decision. Because then, if it went horribly wrong, it would all be my fault.” There was a pause as the two of them simply stared at the piece of white plastic, pausing for breath and eloquence between thoughts. “I think if I had done it then, I could have blamed the circumstances. But you were... you were so nice about it and I just...” He shrugged. “You gave me the option and I chickened out.”

“It makes sense.” Dream’s head bobbed slightly as his boyfriend spoke and George couldn’t help but feel something soft well up inside of him. “You were scared. I was scared. We were both scared and so we didn’t do things for too long and then, well...” His shoulders bounced in a quick shrug, a mirror of the taller boy’s motion.

“And now we’re here.” George nodded in agreement, letting his gaze flicker between the mask and his boyfriend’s face, letting the old and the new mix in his mind. He searched for anything to say, but all he could muster was a single syllable, a soft affirmation.

“Yeah.”

“Still scared?”

“Yeah.” His confession was more breath than word, but Dream only nodded.

“Me too.” George let himself take a shuddering, long breath to steel himself. He could feel the fear, tangible in the way his body was alive and alight with flighty energy, pulsing in his fingertips and choking out his words, but he forced it down. Fear was what got them here. It had no place lingering between them any more.

“Can you come closer?” he asked, and Dream nodded, lips pinched together slightly as he scooted nearer on the couch to his boyfriend, shifting miniscule amounts closer until their knees tapped. Slowly, like he was approaching a wounded animal, George brought his hands up. He could see his boyfriend register their presence, their movement and not flinch so he settled them on his cheeks, cupping the new face that was staring at him with a mix of fear and anticipation in his hands with a gentleness that was usually reserved for baby birds and

the most fragile of pottery. At the soft brush of skin on skin, the taller boy leaned into the touch, a small motion of acceptance that's solid press tore the breath from the other's lungs. Slowly, his thumb skimmed along his boyfriend's cheekbone as he pushed away the terror and just let himself hungrily, greedily, selfishly *look* .

He hadn't been wrong with his first impression. Dream wasn't strikingly handsome or horrifically marred. He was a man, a man with the curve of his jawline tense under George's fingertips and lips pressed together into a thin line. Slowly, as his eyes traced the curve of his boyfriend's cupid's bow, a small realization flickered through him. *Those lips are the ones that talk to me for hours and hours and hours when I need him.* Blinking, his gaze flickered up to meet the blue-hazel-brown-maybe-with-his-goggles-green eyes that were watching him carefully. The thoughts were flowing at a steady stream now as he devoured the sight before him, something finally clicking together in his mind. *Those eyes are the ones that see me for who I am and that mouth is the one that tilts into a smirk when he's teasing me and that brow is what furrows when he lets out one of his wheezing laughs* . Dream wasn't hot, he wasn't model material or someone to make people swoon, but he was *him* and the face and the expressions and every single piece of him was special in a way that George couldn't articulate if you gave him an eternity. Slowly, his gaze dragged back to center on the eye contact between them. A single eyebrow quirked up, curiosity lacing every part he could see from the little creases at the corners of his eyes to the dark centers of his pupils as the older boy sucked in an unsteady breath. *They say the eyes are the windows to the soul and they, whoever "they" are, are not wrong* .

Trying to swallow down his reverie, he focused instead on the heat burning under his touch, the glow of warmth from where his thumbs were running gentle lines over soft skin. Realization came with a soft smile and a glow in his chest to match the one beneath his fingertips as he asked, "Dream, are you blushing?"

"Don't you wish you knew," came the cheeky reply, but it was accompanied by a flicker and flare of heat under George's touch that gave confirmation despite his words.

"Maybe I should go get my goggles-" he said jokingly. His hands slipped away from Dream's face, only to get caught by the wrists as his boyfriend tugged him back towards the couch, a grin lighting up his features and sending a butterfly flutter through George's heart.

"No, no, don't do that-"

"I think I will-"

"No!" Dream shouted playfully, tugging back against his boyfriend's consistent pull, halfway off of the couch as he pressed his feet into the carpet and applied his own weight. It became a game, the pair easily falling back into old patterns of bickering and playfights, laughing as they went back and forth between making any progress towards George's acquisition of his goggles and falling back onto the couch. Quips and jibes were thrown back and forth, laughter filling the space of their home and pushing out any lingering traces of the stiff awkwardness and hurt that had remained from the morning. With a particularly hard tug, George pulled Dream from the couch and stumbled back, the sudden give throwing him off-balance as the pair careened to the floor, ending in a tangle of limbs as the taller man was similarly yanked down by his wrists. For a moment, they lay there, laughing as George's back settled into the carpet and Dream's face dropped to hide his guffaws in his boyfriend's shoulder as they lay there together, chests pressed together and laughing.

The front door opened, and everything froze.

Sapnap stepped through the front door, distractedly talking over his shoulder as he held it for his boyfriend, only turning to look and dropping his words mid-sentence as his eyes widened and he registered the sight before him. The mask was on the side table and half of its owner's face was exposed, frozen in shock as the moment stopped dead. Quiet froze over the area as the single moment felt like it drew long, stretching for many rather than the singular beat it did.

"Sapnap?" asked a voice from the doorway, laced with confusion and concern, snapping time back to its regular speed as the youngest of their group turned and lunged towards his boyfriend, slapping a hand over his eyes and pulling him back from the door.

"Don't look, don't stop, just go, let's go-" he said, leading the taller boy with his free hand, keeping him functionally blindfolded as he dragged him away, not even bothering to close the door behind them as his voice faded with the distance he was rapidly putting between them. Dream and George stared blankly at the now-empty doorway, the sky it framed starting to show the hints of color as it became painted and darkened with oncoming night. Slowly, George turned his face from where it lay half-pressed into the carpet to look up at where his boyfriend's shocked expression was gradually morphing into confusion and amusement.

“What-” he breathed before a loud wheeze of laughter cut him off. Dream moved back from where he was pressed up against him, giggles and guffaws shaking his shoulders as he shook his head.

“Did you see his *face*? ” George grinned and used his grip on his boyfriend’s wrists to help pull himself upright as well, pulling his legs out from beneath where the taller boy was crouching, trying not to wobble with the force of his laughter. “It was like he’d walked in on us having sex or something!”

“Dream!” he gasped, sounding scandalized as he let himself be swept up in the amusement and hilarity and dissolved into his own snickers and giggles. It took them a while to compose themselves again, the image of their scandalized friend still lingering in their minds, but slowly they managed to reign in their laughter. Rubbing his eyes, George sighed and glanced towards the open door letting in the cooling evening air. “You know, if we were having sex he might have at least closed the front door before he ran.” Dream wheezed again, and the two fell back into laughter one last time before finally sobering, pulling themselves back together and standing with smiles on their faces.

“Let’s go find them,” Dream said, sliding on his mask and offering an open hand to his boyfriend, their fingers slotting easily together as they headed out the front door and down the path towards town.

They couldn’t have been terribly far off, but there was still a slightly rushed urgency to their movements as they tried to catch up with their friends. Slowly, as they gained on them, little threads of conversation started to float through the air, lighting on their ears as they made their way down the well-worn path. The voices, strained and stressed as they were, were immediately identifiable and George couldn’t help but listen in as they drew closer and closer and the words became more and more distinguishable.

“It wasn’t that bad, was it? They had clothes on, they were just, like, wrestling or messing around or something, I don’t know.”

"His *face* was out. That's like- that's like worse than him being *naked* , man, like-"

"So you're telling me if he was buck naked with the mask still on in there, that would be less bad than what we just walked in on?" Karl asked, his voice pitched more like a statement

than a question but his gaze still puzzled.

" *Yes* ."

"Dude, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but your family is weird."

George had to bite his lip to keep from laughing as Dream's hand tugged him forwards, stepping from where the path was hidden in the tree line into view. Whatever Sapnap had been about to say was lost as he saw them and his jaw snapped shut, biting off the words before they escaped and instead calling out his friend's name.

"Dream! Hey!" At the call, Karl's head snapped around to face them, the smile alight on his face far more natural than his boyfriend's as he took in the approaching pair.

"Hey, Sap," the masked man said in response. Quiet fell between the two groups and George realized his boyfriend hadn't planned what he was going to say next. Of course, he hadn't either, assuming that Dream would be taking the lead, leaving the groups staring blankly at each other, desperately searching for the right words to fill the space and move the interaction forwards. The only sound was the slight shifting of feet on the dirt and the breeze shifting the grass and leaves around them, white noise making the silence only more noticeable.

"So, uh, what are you guys doing out here? We were just getting some fresh air before we made it home for the evening," Karl offered, and George hoped the gratitude was evident on his face.

"Oh, uh, we were gonna go walk. We're just gonna be out for, like, a while, so don't- you guys can take the house to yourselves tonight, yeah?" Dream said, reaching up to awkwardly scratch at the tangles of his hair.

"Yeah. Yeah, uh, thanks man," Sapnap replied, his own uneasiness lacing the tone. "We'll- we were going to head back now, anyways. Sorry for, uh-"

“I mean, you didn’t mean to- you know.” There was a long moment of silence. “Nothing to be sorry for, man.” There was the quiet shuffling of feet, and a singular cricket began to sing in the grass as the sun began to sink lower in the horizon. As the quiet stretched out insufferably long between them, George and Karl shared a long-suffering look, a moment of understanding as they each reached for their respective dumbass.

“We’re going to go now before it gets too dark-”

“We’ll see you guys later, don’t come back too late-”

Each tugging at a hand and spewing pleasantries, the groups split up on the path, trekking off until they thought they were far enough away to not be heard before dissolving into laughter, the tension dissolving into hilarity as they stumbled away from the scene, hand in hand with their boyfriend. They fell against trees for support, held onto door frames and each other, all laughing at the awkward pressure they’d spoken under, the stuttered phrases and rushed apologies they’d participated in before they moved into the night, hand in hand with their love.

Hands were squeezed with affection, giggles light on lips as doors were opened and paths were foraged, two pairs of lovers escaping into their seclusion.

George didn't question the mask.

There was no more mask to question, after all. It was sitting in the dew-shimmered grass beside them, the cool night air and the moisture hanging low in it driving them to share heat between their bodies rather than space.

George leaned back into his boyfriend's chest, shoulder nudging his sternum and feeling the steady heartbeat beneath his shoulder blade. He’d been in this position a million times before, feeling the warmth from Dream seeping into him as they stared up at the shimmering, flickering night sky, but somehow it felt different now. It was sweeter on his tongue, swelled tighter in his chest, sent tingles of heat to his cheeks as they sat there together. Slowly, without taking his eyes from the diamond shimmers in the cosmos around them, he turned his head so his lips brushed against his boyfriend’s cheek in the ghost of a kiss, the barest hint of affection he could let himself express without his heart exploding. The warm hum he got in

return was like a cat's purr, satisfied and comforting all in one soft sound and he let the grin it evoked slip across his lips uninhibited.

There were new things to try now, and he hummed his own contentment deep in his chest as he brought his head over to rest against Dream's, temple of his forehead coming to lean against the curve of his boyfriend's jaw, feeling the softness of the touch as skin slid over skin and the warmth that radiated beneath it. Slowly, his boyfriend's head lowered, sliding down until George was instead leaning into his cheek and his lips could brush against his forehead, returning the soft flutter of a kiss and sending his heart into similar palpitations.

They played this game for a while, exploring the new things with tentative softness, pretending their focus was on the beauty of the night sky above them rather than that of each other.

"So, what do you think?" George glanced up, blinking at the sudden question as he pulled his gaze from the vast expanse of the starry sky to where his boyfriend was shifting to look into his eyes. "My face. You never said." There was a pause as the question lingered between them and the smaller of the two turned to face him more fully, lips pressed together in contemplation.

"I mean, I don't know yet." Dream looked confused, tilting his head and his boyfriend let himself savor the way his forehead bunched and his nose scrunched up ever so slightly. "Hear me out, hear me out," he said quickly, rushing to calm any lingering doubt or hurt before he could gather his thoughts. They lingered on the tip of his tongue, danced in impossibly many iterations through his mind as the pause drew out between them. "I know your voice," he finally offered in way of clarification, sliding one of his hands down to cover the arm around his waist, his fingers slipping in the spaces between his boyfriend's. "I know what you sound like when you're teasing me, and the way you wheeze when you laugh too hard, and- and what it sounds like if you're tired and don't want to admit it, or when you're *actually* flirting with me and not just trying to make me laugh." There was a pause as he sucked in a slow breath, feeling heat climb to his cheeks as the confusion slipped away and was replaced with something soft and satisfied and just a little bit smug.

"Aww, you love me, Georgie," the newly unmasked man cut in, faint smirk tracing the edges of his lips.



“ *But* ,” he continued forcefully, letting a grin break across his own face, “I don’t know what it *looks* like when you do any of those things.” The smirk grew into a smile as George shifted so he was practically straddling his boyfriend’s legs, looking down at where he was beaming up at him with adoration across every inch of his face. “I want to know,” he added, laughter tainting the jokingly whined words with a bubbly sound. “I want to know *so bad* , Dream.”

Dream laughed, not wheezing and collapsing in on himself but loud chuckles as he straightened up, drawing close enough that his boyfriend could feel the soft brush of his breath caressing his lips.

“Can I show you what it looks like before I kiss you?” he asked, the words soft but light, teasing but gentle as a hand slid up to rest against George’s jaw. The older boy took a slow, deep breath as he drank in the sight before him, how the eyes that stared back at him might have been described as green but shimmered something blue to him, rings of brown tinting the center just around the black core, how the freckled cheek shifted when the edge of his lips slanted in a warm smirk, how he tilted his head slightly when he got the small nod of confirmation from his boyfriend as to not crash their noses together but instead bump them softly as their lips met.

First kisses are soft, chaste things. It was sweet and gentle exploration as their lips pressed together, uncertain and tender as Dream’s thumb swept across his boyfriend’s jawline and they moved back again, something elated and dizzy in their smiles as they took each other in.

“I think I rather like that,” George said, his voice as light as his heart, “but could I see it again just to be sure?”

The sound of a teakettle filled the air between them as Dream laughed, doubling over to press his face into the crook of his boyfriend’s neck, taking a moment to compose himself before nodding and leaning in again to press a quick peck against George’s lips, a grin plastered across his face and joy painted across every feature. “As many times as you want,” he promised as he leaned in again, and as they kissed under the stars the mask stared up at the tiny pinpricks of light, the smile seemingly content as it was pushed away and forgotten in the night.

This was supposed to be a 5k word exercise in "damn why does everyone assume he's gonna be hot under the mask". This was supposed to be a quick little snippet of "it's okay if he's the most average looking guy on the planet when he face reveals". And now, 20-something-k words later, here we are.

I hope you all enjoyed this. I really loved writing this, and while I definitely think it grows in strength rather than being consistent (that first chapter still haunts me if I'm being honest) I'm proud of what I've put out! Thank you all for reading all of it and extra thanks to those who have stuck around since the start. Any interaction is deeply loved and appreciated, commenters, kudo-ers, all of you have my love and heart <3

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